

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

2

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World



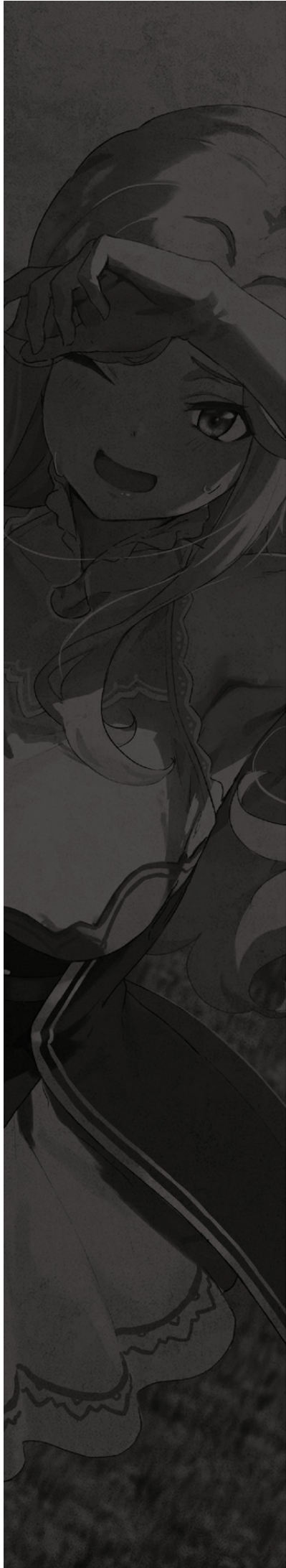


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Prologue: The Tale of a Certain Noble Family

Somewhere under the gentle spring sun, a mansion's courtyard was flooded with light. Birdsong chimed from branches and filled the air. Under the shade of a tree, a man was sitting on a bench.

The man's features were sculpted and handsome, and there was no doubt that he'd been quite the lady-killer back in the day. However, the deep wrinkles lining his face and his snow-white hair told the story of a long life. This man, whose years were layered deep like the rings of a tree, was nodding off where he sat. As he sailed off into the land of dreams, a little bird flew down to join him.

The picturesque tableau might as well have been a piece of artwork done up with an artist's paintbrush, perhaps called *A Peaceful Spring Afternoon in the Garden*.

The shadow of a petite girl fell upon the bench. "Good afternoon, great-grandfather," the young girl said in greeting.

The old man opened his eyes and smiled gently. "And to you, Emilia. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Emilia returned his smile with one of her own, beatific like that of an angel's, shining with adoration for her great-grandfather. She was spunky and full of energy. "Tell me a story, the one about my great-grandaunt!" she said, voice bursting out.

"You sure love that story, don't you?"

"It's my favorite!" she exclaimed. "Great-grandaunt is gentle, but she's tougher than anyone else."

The old man sighed. *Blood will tell, and all that*. His little sister had been a tomboy at Emilia's age too. A grin tugged at his face from the memory. "All right. I'll tell you the story again," he said, giving in to his cherished great-granddaughter's coaxing. "Do you remember the promise our family made?"

“Of course!” she declared with pride. “We of the Eimoor countship promise to pass down the tale of our family’s savior, Master Eizo Tanya, in perpetuity.”

“Very good, very good,” he said, stroking her head. She beamed with happiness, the perfect twin of a golden retriever with its tail wagging.

The promise was to be inherited by the old man’s direct successor, Emilia’s grandfather, but the story was a popular one among the family and had been told over and over again. When the old man had originally made this promise, the other party had pushed back, saying, “I, too, owe you a great debt, so please don’t concern yourself.” Nevertheless, the favor had been so precious to the old man and could not truly be repaid. To tell a story was the least he could do in remembrance.

To his great-granddaughter, the old man mused aloud, “Now then, where shall we begin?”

“From when Master Eizo and great-grandaunt first meet!”

“All the way from the beginning?”

“Great-grandaunt once said that ‘No one is tougher than a woman in love,’ didn’t she?” Emilia said excitedly, her words tripping over one another. “I want to be just like her one day, so I have to study everything! From when they met!”

The old man smiled, happiness blooming in his heart. “I see, I see.”

He rested his head in his hands for a moment. The old man had been wanting to ask his grandson, Emilia’s father, how Emilia’s studies were proceeding, but his grandson reminded him too much of himself when he was at that age. His grandson would likely answer “It’s just the family history.” The conversation would end there, and the old man would ask no further.

And so, he set the matter aside and started to search through his mind. *Ah, how nostalgic.* The memories of those days hadn’t dulled one bit, painted in fresh and vivid colors. He recalled the open grin of the man he called his best friend—hopefully, it wasn’t one-sided—and the genuinely happy smile of his younger sister. He pulled apart the threads of the story from his memories and weaved them in together with what he’d heard from his little sister. Then, he dove in.

“It started on a day which was neither sunny nor nice...”

Chapter 1: Dark Clouds on the Horizon

If anyone were to ask what my job was, most people I know—myself included—would answer “blacksmith.” In a bizarre turn of events, I had ended up in this world after losing my life back on Earth. In Japan, my name had been Tanya Eizo, but now I was known as Eizo Tanya, the blacksmith.

I lived in the Black Forest, which was a dangerous place; wolves, bears, and other beasts roamed freely, insofar as its reputation went. Personally, aside from one altercation with an admittedly savage bear, I rarely felt unsafe here.

My home was an unassuming cabin in the middle of the forest, which doubled as a workshop where I could practice my craft.

But I wasn't the only one who lived out here.

“How's this look, Eizo?”

The one who'd called out to me was a woman named Samya. She was half tiger and a member of the beastfolk, which anyone could easily see by her round, tigerlike ears and her striped hair, patterned like a tiger's pelt. A while back, I'd found her collapsed from injuries sustained in a bear attack. I'd rescued her and she'd been living with me ever since.

Samya held in her hands a mold filled with molten steel. I'd liquefied the metal in my magical furnace, which I could light by focusing the energy around me and pushing it out of my fingertips.

How exactly, you ask? Well...somehow.

Aaanyway, once the fire was lit, the furnace could be used to heat iron ore to the right temperature so it could produce steel. It was a truly indispensable item.

The resulting steel could be poured into a square mold to make plates of metal. It goes without saying that the molten steel was incredibly hot, so it would be a major problem if it were to spill. To prevent such an accident from happening, the mold itself was deeper than it needed to be. The trick was to fill

the mold just enough; the steel should be in no danger of spilling and poured so that the resulting plate of metal wasn't too thick to work with. Samya had been asking me to check and see if she'd poured the correct amount.

I glanced at the mold. "Looks good."

Samya seemed relieved. She set the mold aside and started to work on the next plate.

As for me, well, I wasn't just sitting around and twiddling my thumbs while Samya did all the work. My job began once the metal plate had cooled and set. To forge an item, whether it be a sword or a door hinge, I had to reheat the metal to the perfect temperature, transfer it to the anvil, and use the hammer to shape it. I could intuit the precise temperature of a metal, and the exact points to hammer so that the sheet metal would form the shape I imagined.

Anything that was related to blacksmithing, I could do by instinct. This superpower was actually a cheat that I had received from a cat I'd rescued back on Earth...at the expense of my own life. Lucky for me, the cat had turned out to be not a cat at all, but a godlike being.

At the moment, I was in the middle of making one of Forge Eizo's flagship products—a simple knife. Knives came in all sorts of shapes and sizes, of course, but the knife we were forging today was all-purpose and on the longer side.

There was a red-hot piece of metal on the anvil before me. I hammered it repeatedly, the sharp clang from each hit ringing throughout the workshop. Little by little, the knife started to take shape.

I suppose you could say that I had been granted my unique set of abilities precisely because I'd wanted to do work like this. After all, I'd been given a choice. When I'd been reborn into this world, I'd made a request of the being that'd sent me here: "I want to create things with my own hands and live a quiet life."

My existence here was undeniably still hectic, but I felt no rush; I was perfectly content to fulfill my dream of a quiet life little by little. With my precious second chance, I had nothing but time.

When I was at my best (that is to say, when my cheat abilities were firing on

all cylinders), it was child's play to forge a knife so sharp it could slice through a boulder. However, I usually held my skill back on purpose, since I couldn't possibly sell such a deadly item. Even when I wasn't trying my hardest, the blades I made were leagues better than the average.

The third occupant of the house offered proof that my skills were the real deal.

"Boss, can you please take a look at my work?"

The woman who'd spoken to me was named Rike. She had the appearance of a young girl, but make no mistake, she was a fully grown adult and an exceptional one at that. Her short stature was the result of her dwarven genes.

"Of course," I said in response.

"Thank you," she replied politely.

I carefully inspected the knife that she was in the process of forging while thinking about whether my own work could be a helpful reference to her in any way. She *was* my apprentice, after all.

Since coming to this world, I had learned of a dwarven custom: dwarves often left their homes when they came of age in order to search for an apprenticeship at a suitable smithing workshop. After seeing the quality of the blades I had been selling in the marketplace, Rike had approached me and petitioned to learn from me. Our master—pupil relationship was also the reason she called me "Boss" instead of just Eizo.

Dwarves were more gifted blacksmiths than humans by nature, so it was a true honor to be recognized by one. The fact that Rike wanted to apprentice with me affirmed my prowess with a blacksmith's hammer.

Rike ran a finger along the spine of the knife I was working on, spellbound by the make. "You never fail to astound me, Boss. I've seen what you can do when you really put your mind to it, but this knife is exceptional in its own right. I can only hope that one day I'll reach your level."

"I have faith in you."

"Thank you, Boss!" Rike replied with a firm nod.

Since all my skills were cheats, I couldn't properly teach her—all I could do was let her observe and steal whatever techniques she could from me. I wished I could do more for her, but as I'd told her, I had no doubt that Rike would become a master blacksmith even without my help.

The three of us, Samya, Rike, and I, eked out a blacksmith's living together in the middle of the forest. We were largely self-sufficient, but there were still necessities that we had no choice but to purchase, which meant that we had to make money. We earned our keep by selling the knives, swords, and other items that we'd forged.

We now had a retail partner named Camilo, a capable man who used to travel around as a peddler. Recently, he'd opened a shop in the nearby city, and he was our invaluable ally. We visited him roughly once a week to drop off the goods we'd made and to purchase anything we were lacking. This partnership made it possible for the three of us to live comfortably day-to-day.

And today was a city day! In other words, we would soon be meeting with Camilo.

The morning had dawned gray and gloomy with heavy clouds blanketing the sky. Though the Black Forest had never been a place anyone would call bright, it was noticeably dimmer than usual beneath the shadows of the trees. Nevertheless, we piled up the knives and other goods in our cart and set off into the forest, pulling our cargo behind us.

We kept to a slow and steady pace because we needed to be on watch for packs of wolves and for tree deer, a species of deer that become a menace when angered. The beasts of the forest usually left us alone, but we wanted to make sure to avoid any unnecessary confrontations, whether with animals or other humans.

Crossing through the forest, we emerged onto the road leading into the city. At this point, the road was more of a downtrodden path, with the Black Forest on one side and open plains on the other. The weather hadn't improved during our trek; normally, the contrast between the clear, blue skies and the lush, grassy plains made for a scenic view, but today, the blue had been completely

leached from the sky. Somber, dark-gray clouds spoiled the beauty of the landscape.

This road was occasionally patrolled by the city's soldiers, though that didn't mean it was perfectly safe. From the stories I'd heard, bandits roamed these parts as well, so we couldn't let our guards down. We'd never been attacked thus far, but that was all the more reason to be careful. Misfortune tended to strike immediately once you got cocky.

We trudged along the road at a comfortable pace while remaining vigilant, and soon we could see the shadowy haze of the city walls off in the distance. When the city had first been built, the walls had marked the settlement's boundary, but over time, the city had grown and spilled past those walls. Now, there was a fence (if you could call a wall taller than your average adult a fence) built around the entire area, and these outer walls demarcated the true border of the city.

The entrance to the city was a gate in the fence, where a man stood watch, keeping an eye on anyone entering. The guard on duty today was one we'd met several times before, and we all said our hellos. Since he already knew us, he was content to wave us through, providing that we didn't do anything blatantly suspicious in front of him.

The first time I'd come to the city, I'd met a guard named Marius. He was often on duty when I visited. He had also been my very first customer. Unfortunately, we hadn't seen him recently—he had gone to the capital and was yet to return, or so we'd heard from one of his fellow guards. That conversation had taken place a while ago, so perhaps it was time for me to ask Camilo if he knew anything. As a merchant, he was sure to be a hub of information and gossip, so I was hoping he'd heard something about Marius through the grapevine.

Camilo's store was large and spacious. When we arrived, we took our cart around back, where the shop's storage was located. We then sought out Camilo to start our usual negotiations.

Our discussions were always short and sweet. Camilo would confirm the types and quantities of the goods we'd brought, and we would tell him what we

wanted to purchase for the day. The head clerk would check our inventory, then leave the room, directing the staff to load our cart with the goods we'd requested. At this point, our visit was a fixed routine.

Once we'd finished talking business and the head clerk had left to take care of the details, Camilo and I would usually spend some time chatting about recent news, along with any topic that came to mind. Both of us were now comfortable enough around each other to be open and frank. Today, I had a pressing question that I needed to ask no matter what, so I switched gears in the middle of our conversation.

"By the way, Camilo, have you heard any news about the capital as of late?"

"Why are you asking?"

"One of the guards that I'm friends with left for the capital a while back, but he hasn't returned yet," I explained. "It's unusual for a city guard to be dispatched to the capital, no? And if he were visiting family, the trip wouldn't have lasted so long... He bought a knife and sword from me and has helped me out over and over again, so I'm worried about him."

Camilo paused and said, "Let me think..." The room sank into a deep, brooding silence. It was clear that he knew *something*, though I didn't know how much. Of course, staying informed was natural for someone in his trade.

At last, Camilo opened his mouth to speak. "Something fishy is going down in the capital. His Majesty the King isn't involved, but one of the noble families just a step down from royalty is knee-deep in it. I think your guard is likely related in some way. I can't tell you any more than that, though, for your own good."

I considered Camilo's information. "Thanks for telling me. And I'm sorry as well—I hope I'm not getting you into any trouble."

"Don't worry about it. Just try not to stick your head into anything dangerous, okay?"

"Yeah, no problem, I understand," I reassured him. "Anyway, should I compensate you for the info, or can I consider it complimentary?"

"Hey! You're more bloodthirsty than a merchant when it comes to business."

Camilo and I shared a laugh at that. In the back of my mind, I fervently wished that we'd both be able to steer clear of the mess brewing in the capital.

Once Camilo and I had finished our chat about recent events, Samya, Rike, and I left the shop. Outside, the roof of clouds that'd been hanging over our heads all morning had broken up in places, so the sun streamed down through the cracks.

As a mere blacksmith, there was nothing I could do for Marius, and Camilo had already supplied us with everything we needed to buy, so our business in the city was complete. Eventually, I wanted to buy some seeds to plant, but that could wait until we'd finished preparing the garden plot.

It was now time for us to head home, so we went to fetch our cart.

It had been two weeks since our last trip into the city, so I thought Camilo might've prepared us with two weeks worth of ore and charcoal. However, there was only one week's supply. I was honestly happy to be wrong—I'd told him last time that we'd be taking one week off from blacksmithing, and it looked like he'd taken our vacation into account. His attention to detail was surely one of the reasons why he'd become such a successful merchant.

We said our farewells to the guard as we exited the city fence. It was the same one from this morning, which, now that I thought about it, shouldn't have been a surprise. After all, we hadn't been at Camilo's for very long.

We could make our way home in our sleep at this point, but we nonetheless remained watchful and on our toes. The grassy plains extended as far as the eye could see, and the gentle breeze was a blessed relief for my body, which was flushed from the strain of pulling the cart along. Before I knew it, the cooling wind had lulled me into a state of relaxation. *Come on, Eizo. You know better than that!*

"It's hard to stay alert when the breeze feels so good, isn't it?" I said to Rike and Samya.

Rike seemed to agree. "Yes. But as long as we're not in any danger, it's the perfect weather for an outing!"

“I can tell how relaxed you are, Eizo,” Samya said, smiling.

It’s a beautiful day. Anyone would agree.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t exactly pull up on the side of the road and lay out a picnic for lunch. The most we could do was let the sunshine buoy our moods as we walked back home.

So we continued down the road, spirits high. We were almost at the crossroads into the forest when Samya came to a dead stop. Her rounded tiger ears were swiveling this way and that, indicating that she’d sensed something.

“Robbers?” I asked her, my voice tense.

“Not sure,” she replied. “But I can hear sounds of a battle. Something’s going on just ahead...” She glanced at us with indecision in her eyes, torn as to whether she should investigate.

“Samya, can you run ahead and check it out? If someone’s being attacked by wolves or bandits, we can help them. Rike and I will be there as fast as we can. If things are too dangerous, come back to us right away.”

“Got it.” Samya nodded sharply before turning forward and breaking into a sprint. Despite her speed, her footsteps barely made any sound, as expected of a tiger-type beastfolk.

I turned to Rike. “All right then, let’s go.”

“Okay!”

The two of us pulled our cargo along with all our strength, doing our best to catch up with Samya as soon as possible. The cart shook and bounced around, but it didn’t overbalance or overturn. *Thank god we’re still on the city road.* The going would’ve been much slower if we’d been in the forest or on an unmaintained trail.

I trusted that our materials were all secured tightly to the cart and we plowed ahead at full speed. It felt like we’d been running forever, even though only a handful of minutes had actually passed. Soon, I heard the skirmish that Samya’s sharp ears had picked up earlier. I could tell that there were several people involved.

Nothing to do now but dive right in.

“Rike, let’s leave the cart here. Follow me.”

“All right.”

“Once we reach the battle, wait along the side. Don’t join the fray,” I told her.

“I understand!”

Rike had learned some self-defense during her travels, but this situation looked like it was going to be more than her skills could handle. She was, of course, carrying one of my custom knives, but it didn’t matter how sharp a weapon was if the wielder couldn’t land a hit. I just wanted to make sure that Rike was safe.

The two of us pulled the cart toward the side of the road, then plunged forward.

The battle unfolded before our eyes: Three men were facing off against Samya and another young woman. Samya had nocked an arrow on her bow. The woman was wielding a longsword, but her movements were sluggish, so I figured that she must be injured.

I drew my shortsword. “Stop right there, you bastards!!!” I hollered as I ran.

The men glanced at me. “Take care of him,” one of them ordered.

One man peeled off from the group and lunged at me. I closed the distance between us and slashed at him with a broad overhead swing. He then tried to parry my sword with his own, but I’d put all my strength into my attack. He did manage to stop the downward motion of my sword but was unable to fully repel it. I took advantage of his momentary shock and diverted momentum into a follow-up attack, right into the man’s torso.

He reacted too slowly. My sword sank deep into his body, and he coughed up a mixture of foamy blood.

I ripped my sword out of his abdomen and immediately turned my blade, business end first, toward the remaining two assailants. I didn’t even spare a moment to check on whether my victim had collapsed or not.

If these men were going to run, they'd better do it. It was the smart choice—we outnumbered them now.

“Shit,” one of them spat, but neither moved to retreat.

They split up instead, one sent to deal with me, and one battling Samya and the mysterious woman. The men probably thought they'd be able to get off scot-free if they managed to dispose of me. They were obviously hedging their bets on Samya (overlooking her tiger genes) and the mystery woman being easy targets.

As my opponent hurtled toward me, I drew my knife. I was now wielding the shortsword in one hand and the knife in the other. My opponent didn't seem to notice, and he came at me with a side swing. A breath before his blade sliced into me, I intercepted the blow with my knife.

Well, “intercept” might've been something of an understatement. My knife actually sliced clean through his sword, even though I had done nothing but block. His body was left wide open from the failed attack, and I thrust my sword through his chest, just like I had with the first man.

And then there was one.

Hearing the thud of his comrade's body falling to the ground, the final man tried to run, but before he could, Samya skewered him with an arrow. A single arrow normally wouldn't be enough to stop a man, but she was using my custom arrowheads.

The last of the three foes fell down into the dirt, dead.

My senses were all on high alert. I took a moment to scan our surroundings, but it seemed as if we were now alone—it would've been a pain if there'd been any more stragglers. I breathed out a sigh of relief before calling Rike over, and then we joined up with Samya and the woman we'd saved.

“Are you injured?” I asked Samya.

“No, neither of us was hurt badly.”

“Good,” I said with genuine relief. I turned to face the woman.

We'd rescued her without thinking, but she might've actually been the one in the wrong. I couldn't totally rule out the possibility that she'd committed a crime and the men I'd killed were actually law enforcement.

The men that I'd...killed.

This was the first time I'd used one of my swords for its intended purpose—to shed blood. Needless to say, I'd never killed anyone in my previous life.

I'd assumed that it would be harder for me to cut down a man in cold blood, but helped along by my cheat abilities, I'd managed it without a second thought. A dark and heavy weight had taken up residence in my heart...but I didn't regret my actions and I wasn't panicking.

How bizarre. The idea of someone using my blades to maim... I usually found the notion utterly repulsive, so it was strange that I could now be so blasé.

"What's wrong, Eizo? You're not hurt, are you?" Samya was looking at me with an expression of deep anxiety.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," I reassured her, but I could only manage a stiff smile. "Thanks for worrying about me." I then turned and directed my attention to the elephant in the room. "Now as for you, my lady..."

The woman's hair—shining and blond—was unadorned, and she was dressed like any other traveler; however, I'd failed to notice mid-combat that she had a breastplate and shin guards since they'd been partially obscured by her cloak. In a sense, she wore the minimum amount of armor she could without attracting attention to herself. Her breastplate could be almost entirely hidden if she clasped her cloak shut.

"Would you kindly tell us who you are and why those men were attacking you?"

The woman didn't respond.

Not ready to give up, I tried another tactic. "Even without you saying anything, it's obvious that there were...circumstances, let's say, and I'm sure they're hard to explain. However, we just killed three men, and if the guard questions us, we're gonna need a reason. So, think of your answer as a favor. Can you please tell us how all of this happened?"

She stared steadily into my eyes. I couldn't help but notice that her own eyes were a stunning blue. I hadn't met a lot of people in this world, but I was positive that, with her refined features, she would be considered a beauty by just about anyone.

For some reason, she looked familiar. *Does she perhaps resemble a western actress I'd seen in a movie back on Earth?*

At last, she decided to speak. "First, I'd like to offer my thanks. My name is Diana Eimoor. I live in the capital, but for various reasons, it has been decided that I should stay elsewhere for a short while. I had been traveling to my temporary residence, but then those men attacked me. I don't even want to think about what would've happened if you all had not come along."

I noticed that she had a last name—her family must've been the source of the mess that Camilo had alluded to.

I shot a meaningful look at Samya, who could usually detect when a person was lying by their scent. Samya shook her head slightly, confirming that the young woman was telling the truth.

"I understand your situation," I said, then gestured to the dead men lying nearby. "Now what should we do with them?"

It would take a little while to hide the bodies, and we might get discovered by an ill-timed patrol. On the other hand, if we were to alert the authorities of the situation ourselves, we'd have to wait for them to arrive.

It scared me how calm I was, but now wasn't the time to analyze that.

As I waffled, the woman—Diana—made a suggestion. "Let's hide them."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I suppose they weren't your average robbers."

"I'm sure," she said firmly. "Those men were after me. I don't want the person who sent them to know that they failed their mission...at least, for as long as possible."

"In the meantime, you'll move into your temporary residence?"

"Yes."

She *was* being chased, though that didn't necessarily mean that she was the

“good guy” in this scenario...but what the hell. *I’m already on board the ship, so let’s see where the winds take us.*

“We can hide them in the forest,” I said. “Rike, would you mind pulling the cart over here?”

“I understand.” She went to follow my order.

It wasn’t that I wanted to load them onto the cart; rather, my plan was to drag them into the trees before Rike returned. We could make it look like wolves had killed the men because luckily, we’d made it out of the battle without getting blood on ourselves.

Next, I turned to Samya. “Can you help me out?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

“No need to thank me,” she said. “Of course I’ll help.”

We each grabbed a set of arms and started to drag the corpses toward the tree line. Pulling with all my strength, the process didn’t take long. We left the bodies just within the outer border of the trees, but the edge of the forest was still the forest. The bodies were hidden from plain view if soldiers came to patrol, and the wolves would come sniffing for fresh meat before the day was out.

We finished right on time as Rike arrived with the cart.

“Diana, the three of us will be heading home now, but before we part ways, will you tell us where you’re going?” I asked. “Who knows, we may be of service to you in the future.”

Diana looked visibly torn.

I’d saved her life, but we were still more or less strangers. I wouldn’t blame her for being reluctant to spill her story to some random old geezer.

Yet, contrary to expectation, Diana eventually responded. “I’ll be staying with an acquaintance of my elder brother, but he lives in a rather remote place.”

A man after my own heart!

“He took up residence in this area not long ago.”

The similarities just keep piling up. I wonder what kind of person he is...

“He’s a blacksmith with overwhelming skills.”

Uhhh...what did she just say?!

“He forged my brother’s cherished knife and his sword. My brother said that once he handles the current state of affairs, he’ll visit this blacksmith for a tune-up.”

A man who owns a knife and a sword of my design. Someone with hair as blonde as Diana’s, with her same distinguished features. I knew exactly one person who matched that description, but surely, it couldn’t be...

“Um... Diana, your brother wouldn’t happen to be a guard in the city down the main road, would he?” I asked tentatively. “A guard by the name of Marius?”

“Yes...that’s right,” Diana said with a dazed expression. “My brother is Marius Albert Eimoor, but how did you know that?”

It all...makes sense now...

“Diana,” I started.

“Yes.”

“I think the acquaintance your brother told you about is...me.”

“Excuse me?!”

She looked suspicious. In her mind, it was too much of a coincidence that her rescuer had turned out to be the man she’d been looking for. If I were in her shoes, the likelihood of me accepting that information with a laugh and a “Golly gee, thanks for telling me!” was null.

But alas, here we were.

“The three of us live within the Black Forest,” I explained. “Our cabin is quite a trek into the woods, so it’s likely the best shelter for you in these circumstances.”

“My brother told me I should first talk to a merchant named Camilo if I

wanted to find the blacksmith.”

“That eliminates any remaining doubt then. Camilo is my sole retail partner and the one person who knows where I live.”

Actually, there was one other person who knew where I lived: Helen, the mercenary who’d visited my workshop to request a commission. It would be an entirely different kind of problem if Helen had leaked my location, but that seemed very out of character for her. Regardless, I didn’t want to complicate the situation with any unnecessary information, so I kept Helen’s existence mum.

Diana stared fixedly at me, and said, “Can you please tell me your name?”

In the whirlwind of events, I’d completely forgotten to introduce myself.

“Of course. My name is Eizo,” I said, choosing to keep my family name, Tanya, a secret for now. “The woman with the tiger features is Samya, and the dwarf is Rike.”

Both Samya and Rike gave their greetings.

“Eizo...” Diana repeated. I couldn’t tell from her expression whether she recognized the name or not.

“In any case, you’ve bought yourself some time from your pursuers, since those three are out of the way. Why not come and stay with us, at least for a day?”

I didn’t want us dawdling in the forest for much longer. If a patrol came by, it’d be hard to explain away our actions, not to mention that it would be a major headache. The fallout would be unfathomable if they discovered that we’d killed the men.

“All right, I’ll go along with your proposal,” Diana acquiesced at last. “Please pardon my intrusion for today.”

“Good. Let’s get going then. Samya, if you could watch our backs, then Rike and I will pull the cart. Diana, can I count on you to keep watch with Samya?”

“Of course. It would be my pleasure,” Diana said, directing the second half of her statement at Samya.

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Samya responded.

Having decided on a course of action, we started for home as a party of four. We had veered off the main road, so we needed to backtrack in order to rejoin the trail into the forest. This ate up a quarter of an hour.

Once we’d been trekking a whole hour, I called for a break. “Let’s take a short rest. What do you all think?”

“Fine by me,” said Samya.

“Yes, Boss,” Rike chimed in with her usual politeness.

“I would like that as well,” Diana agreed.

With the three of them on the same page, we gathered around, set down our belongings for the moment, and took a water break. I shared some of mine with Diana.

After I’d quenched my thirst, I waved Samya over, wanting her to join me away from the other two. “Can you c’mere a sec?”

She trotted over without delay. “What’s up?”

“Do you sense any signs that we’re being followed?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “Nothing stands out to me, but I wanted to check with you.”

She sniffed at the air, her nose twitching. “Hmm... I don’t smell anything. I don’t sense anyone either besides the four of us.”

“That’s a relief.”

I’d been worried about what to do if we were being tailed from afar. After all, we were a large group, and Rike and I had our hands full with pulling the cart. We’d be hard to miss, but that said, visibility was pretty low, so it wouldn’t be easy to follow us through this forest. I guess I was overthinking, but I preferred that to the alternative.

Once we’d rejoined the road, we kept on high alert all the way back to the cabin. All and all, the journey took us one and a half times longer than usual, but we eventually made it home.

I turned to our guest. “Diana, sorry to make you wait, but we have to take care of the cargo first.”

“Please don’t mind me. In fact, can I do anything to help out?”

I hesitated before answering. She *was* a guest, but if she was going to be living here, it wouldn’t hurt to have her help out with small chores. “He who does not work, neither shall he eat,” or so it’s said. The smithing work would be another story though.

“I’ll take you up on your kind offer,” I said. “Come on. I’ll show you where everything goes.”

“All right.”

The four of us worked together to offload the ore and charcoal and bring it all into the workshop. We stored the salt and daily necessities in the living space. I wanted to yield the guest room—formerly known as the study—to Diana, so I had Samya and Rike move their belongings out of my bedroom and into their own rooms, making space for everyone to move in.

“The house will be a tad crowded with all of us, but I hope you’ll find it cozy,” I said to Diana.

She didn’t look put off by the space. If anything, she seemed impressed. “I never knew there was such a charming cabin in the Black Forest.”

“I just moved in recently, like your brother said. Anyway, it looks like Rike and Samya are moving things around, so let’s get you settled in.”

“Sure.”

Now that we were hosting a high-class woman, I was doubly grateful we’d put more effort into making the guest bed.

“We haven’t been expecting many visitors, so I apologize for the room’s sparsity. We’re a simple household, so this is already luxurious for us. I hope you’ll understand.”

Diana’s response was kind. “Please, don’t trouble yourself on my account. This is more than enough for me.”

“Make yourself comfortable—we’ve all had a long day. You can leave your

cloak here and dust off from your travels. I'll have Samya and Rike bring you hot water later to rinse off."

"Thank you. That would be much appreciated."

I gave her a wave and left the room.

What now? I needed to find out more about Diana's circumstances, but I had a feeling that asking would mark a point of no return.

It was obvious from her mannerisms that she was a lady through and through, and yet she was courteous to even a lowly blacksmith like yours truly. Was it because she'd heard about me from her brother, Marius?

And she'd treated Samya with kindness too!

I decided to leave the serious conversation for later. It was time for dinner.

But before that, I took off my traveling gear and heated enough water for the four of us. We all wiped ourselves down in our respective rooms before gathering in the living space to eat.

The menu today was cured boar ribs and lentil (or lentil-equivalent) soup, paired with flatbread and wine. It was extravagant for Samya, Rike, and me, but was it good enough for Diana?

"This is all we have to offer you. I hope it's to your tastes," I said to her.

I thought she might be reluctant to eat, but she took a bite without any hesitation. Seeing her willingness to try my cooking made me more anxious to hear her review.

"How...is it?"

"It's delicious!" Her blue eyes sparkled with pleasure.



The rest of us jumped at her exclamation, a detail which didn't escape her, and she shrunk in on herself. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"Don't apologize," I said. "I'm glad you like it. We were all just worried that we wouldn't meet the expectations of a proper lady."

"Please, there's no need to stand on ceremony."

"Anyway, enjoying delicious food is one of the great pleasures of life. A bad meal can ruin the entire day," I said earnestly in spite of myself. When I'd been overwhelmed by work in my previous life, a good meal had never failed to cheer me up.

I suddenly remembered an older woman that had run an eatery I'd frequently visited in Japan. One of the few regrets I had from my old life was that I'd never be able to see her again.

"Have you ever had a bad meal in your life?" Samya teased.

"Of course!" I exclaimed. "Countless times. What kind of life do you think I've had?"

"You sure?" she replied cheekily. "I just assumed you were too picky for that."

"Not me. Let me tell you about the time when..." I began to tell stories of some places I'd eaten back on Earth, though I made sure to tweak the details so as not to reveal my secret.

We grew quite rowdy while discussing the worst foods we'd eaten in our lives. Even Diana told us a story about the time she'd tried a "delicacy" made with a mystery meat, which had ended up being utterly disgusting.

Alas, all good things had to come to an end, and I'd made up my mind during the meal—I had to press Diana for the details of her circumstances.

"Now that we've all eaten our fill, Diana, can you please tell us the rest of the story? Why were you chased out of the capital?"

Diana hesitated briefly. "All right... I suppose I can't hide it any longer."

She began her tale.

###

Diana (and Marius) were part of the Eimoor countship whose domain included the city that we frequented. The family was blessed with four children: three sons and the sole daughter, Diana. The eldest son was Leon and the second, Karel. Marius was the youngest of the three. Naturally, Leon was the successor of the countship.

The story began one month prior. Count Eimoor and Leon had led a mission to hunt down a pack of magical beasts that'd been rampaging near the country's border. They took only their private guards with them since the beasts were predicted to be small fry. Such a mission would not normally require the presence of Leon, let alone the count. However, Count Eimoor was set to retire soon, and before passing on his title and all of its responsibilities, he wanted to show his son how to run a mission firsthand.

So, the head and the successor of the Eimoor family had headed to battle without mobilizing the country's soldiers, and when they'd arrived, they'd found that their intel had been completely off the mark. Both the count and Leon had died on the battlefield, and their forces had been decimated. A lucky few were able to flee with their lives, and they returned with tales of the monsters that had wrecked everything in sight.

Upon receiving the devastating news, Marius had rushed back home. However, when he'd investigated the incident, he'd uncovered a few discrepancies in the story. First and foremost, the corpses he'd examined, including those of his father and brother, hadn't been marred with the claw and teeth marks that usually accompanied attacks by wild animals. Had there been any beasts in the battle at all? Could it be that even the initial report had been falsified?

If the entire incident had been a ruse all along, the prime suspect was, of course, Karel, but there was no proof. And Karel wasn't talking either. After all, as long as he stayed away from the investigation and didn't incriminate himself, the countship would soon fall into his lap.

But that was when a boulder smashed straight through Karel's carefully laid plans. The records revealed that it was not Karel who would inherit the estate in the event of Leon's death, but Marius—Karel had been born to a mistress, whereas Marius was the son of the count's legitimate wife. Upon Marius's birth,

the order of inheritance had been changed.

And yet, Karel's mother had died while giving birth to him, and the lady of the house, Count Eimoor's wife, had been moved by those tragic circumstances to take in Karel under her care. She'd raised him as one of her own, no different from his half brothers.

Having been denied what he'd considered his birthright, Karel had cursed Marius and decided that he had no choice but to eliminate his half brother. That was easier said than done, since Marius lived away from the capital; the city where Marius worked as a guard was a half day's journey away by horse-drawn carriage. Because of this distance, it was difficult, if not impossible, to keep a tight grip around the nitty-gritty details of any schemes. Karel would make the occasional attempt on Marius's life, but the deadlock had yet to be resolved.

This was the state of the capital intrigue at the present time. However, the stalemate couldn't continue for much longer. The head of the family had to be decided upon soon, lest the title be held in forfeit. Either Karel or Marius would have to make a move, and they would have to do it soon.

The reason Diana had been entangled in the inheritance battle was because she, too, was a legitimate child of Count Eimoor. If she were to marry the son of another noble family, it wasn't unthinkable that she could inherit the estate instead. Karel had no intention of leaving the matter of inheritance to chance, and he'd planned to take her out while he could. To protect her life, Marius had sent her to me while he took care of Karel, one way or another. However, Karel had seen through Marius's plans and arranged for some men to intercept Diana during her journey, which was when we'd come to her aid.

"You haven't had it easy," I said, mulling over everything that she'd told me.

It now seemed like Diana would be staying with us for more than one or two weeks, which was no skin off my back, but would she be able to rough it here for so long?

More importantly, Diana is part of the nobility! I knew she was from an affluent family, but actual nobility? And Marius is set to succeed the countship?!

This explained why Marius's instincts were so much sharper than your average guard, and also how he knew the inner workings of the city within the walls.

"I think I now understand the full picture of what's happening in the capital, along with yours and Marius's circumstances. There are no issues with you staying here, but how do you feel about it, Diana?" Since I knew how important her family really was, maybe I should be bowing and scraping, but it was too little, too late for that.

"How I feel?" Diana parroted, not understanding the question.

"Well...you know, won't it be problematic for a person of your standing to be associated with a humble blacksmith like me? Never mind that there are two other women here. If rumors should spread that you were staying with me, wouldn't you be ousted from the noble class?"

"You needn't worry about that, Eizo. My brother said he would take care of it," Diana reassured me.

"Then there's the matter of duration. You're likely going to be here for the foreseeable future, not just one or two weeks. Are you okay with that?"

"Of course. It hasn't been long since we met, but I already know how kind Samya and Rike are. And how kind you are. I have no worries in that regard."

"Hmmm..." *Fine by her, fine by me.* "Lastly, do you have anything to verify that Marius wanted you to seek shelter with *me*, specifically?"

"There should be no mistake. Now that I've come here in person, I firmly agree with his assessment. There's no better place for me to hide away."

"Yes, but I'd like to verify, just in case." On my end, I was happy to take her in, but if it turned out that she was meant to go elsewhere, I'd be no better than a kidnapper as far as society at large was concerned. "Anything will do, just some physical proof..." I murmured.

"Oh, now that you mention it, I do have a letter I was supposed to give to Camilo."

"The details will be written in the letter?"

“Most likely.”

I was still hesitant. “I can’t just read someone else’s letter.”

“The letter is about me, and I give my permission,” she insisted. “I’ll bring it over.” She stood up and disappeared into the guest room.

I wonder... Could it be that she actually enjoys our company? Upon seeing her persistence, a feeling of delight sparked within me.

Diana brought out the letter and handed it over. The envelope was sealed with wax, but there was no crest imprinted on it, perhaps as a way to divert attention.

This world doesn’t have any laws about opening other people’s mail, right?

I sliced open the envelope with my knife.

Master Camilo,

I have faith that you’ve kept abreast of the news from the capital and have grasped the complexities at hand.

The body of the letter detailed the trouble Marius and Diana were mired in, exactly as Diana had described to me. The conclusion laid bare Marius’s request.

I entrust my sister, Diana, to you. Please help introduce her to the blacksmith who forged my sword. I know not his place of address, but only that he lives in a remote location which would make a suitable shelter for my sister. Since you are in a partnership with him, would you please take care of my sister until he visits your shop?

Marius had written a few lines of closing salutations as well, but I’d read what I needed to. “That cinches it. Marius intended for you to come to us. We’ve just taken a shortcut to get to where we are.”

The three women nodded in agreement.

There was another benefit to the fact that Diana had ended up coming straight here instead of stopping at Camilo's as planned: it would help throw off any pursuers. By the time anyone noticed the disappearance of the thugs we'd taken out, the evidence would already have vanished into the wind.

"Diana, you are welcome here as long as you need," I stated. "Please take care to stay within the clearing around the cabin. If you wish to venture into the forest, take either me or Samya with you, otherwise you may be targeted by wolves."

"I promise," she said.

"I understand that there may be matters you wouldn't want to discuss with a man. In such a case, please do lean on Samya and Rike for help."

"I don't mean to impose, but thank you for the warm welcome." Diana turned to Samya and Rike, then bowed.

"We're all friends here!" Samya said with a smile. "Come to us anytime."

"If you don't mind, there's something that's bothering me," I said, shifting gears. My next question was going to be rude, but I had to know. "Diana, why are you speaking so politely to us? I'm not saying it's wrong, but you're part of the upper class. You don't need to be so reserved."

"You're my saviors," Diana said simply.

"We'll be living together for some time. Personally, I would be grateful if you could speak more casually. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to catch you off guard or anything like that. It would simply be more comfortable for all of us, I imagine."

"I understand... I mean... Okay. I'll try."

"Thank you."

"But..." She hesitated.

"What is it?" I pressed.

"I don't want to be a burden either. Can I help out around the house?"

I took a second to consider. She was our guest, after all, and it wasn't likely

that another private commission would drop by, so we would be working on our usual smithing schedule. I guess I could think of it as rent.

“All right, you can help out with the smithing,” I finally agreed.

“Are you sure?”

“Only with basic tasks.”

“Thanks!” She seemed overflowing with enthusiasm.

I guess we would need to write her into our slow lives for now, though harboring a petite fugitive was unlikely to make for a slow anything.

“That settles it. Now let’s get some rest. We all deserve it after the day we’ve had.”

“Sounds good,” Diana responded.

“Kay,” Samya said.

And finally, Rike. “Agreed.”

The three of them chimed their acquiescence, putting an end to our long, adventure-filled day.

Chapter 2: A Different Kind of Normal

It had become part of my routine to fetch water from the lake first thing in the morning before anyone else was awake. Rike had once protested that chores were part of the apprentice's job, but I'd told her that I wanted to do it; these morning walks were one of my few chances to stretch and get some exercise. Carrying the two full water jugs home was good strength training.

Usually, Samya and Rike would be awake by the time I returned to the cabin, and the three of us would rinse off using the fresh water I'd brought back. Starting today though, we'd be freshening up as a group of four—Diana was going to be joining us for the time being. We all washed our faces and cleaned our teeth before breaking off for our morning tasks; I would be making breakfast as the others did the laundry. Back on Earth, I could pop two slices of bread into the toaster, whip up some eggs, and call it a day. However, in this world, preparing a meal took longer, so there was plenty of time for those three to finish the wash while I cooked.

For laundry, we used a detergent made from ash, which was an abundant by-product of burning charcoal. We mixed the ash with water in a jar that was reserved for that purpose. This tried-and-true method of making detergent had been used even early on in Earth's history, and it continued to stand the test of time. I'm sure that if we looked, we could find plants like soapberries with saponins, but for now, our ash detergent worked perfectly well. Perhaps in the future when we had some downtime...

On today's breakfast menu was a wheat porridge and cured-meat soup. To reduce the time I'd need to spend cooking meals, I made extra soup for lunch or dinner or to use as a stock.

Breakfast was a vital part of our routine, filled with delicious food, good company, and engaging conversations. It was also an opportunity for Samya, Rike, and me—and Diana as well, for the time being—to discuss our plans for the day.

For the next three days, we would be smithing shortswords and longswords. Since Samya was familiar with the steps, she could teach Diana the basics.

The process was straightforward. We first needed to cover the prototype of the sword, which was already made, with clay. Once the clay hardened, it would be split down the middle and carefully removed from the prototype. These two pieces would become the halves of the mold. Molten steel would then be poured into the mold to produce the foundation of the sword. Once the sword was unmolded, any surface irregularities (otherwise known as “burrs”), such as extra metal in the seam of the mold, needed to be removed, and any warped places straightened. There were a few final touches before the sword could be reheated and quenched. Lastly, after the sword had hardened, it underwent a final round of polishing and sharpening.

Samya remembered everything I’d taught her previously, so she guided Diana through making the mold.

Come to think of it, we’d have to find a supplier for clay as well. The lake was nearby, which meant that there was a confined aquifer below the surface, sandwiched by an impermeable layer of clay, and that was the place where the water welled out. We could always try to dig to see if we could find any clay. And for our purposes, we didn’t need pure clay; loam would work just as well.

But I digress. I’ll note that down for another time.

Samya and Diana handled the first half of the smithing process, up until the sword was unmolded. Then, Rike and I took over. Someone with Diana’s upbringing was unlikely to have the strength required for deburring, and wielding the blacksmith’s hammer was hard work.

That said, Diana did seem to know her way around a sword—she’d been wearing armor when we’d first met, and had fought off her attackers alone until we’d joined the fray.

As Rike and I worked to fix any irregularities in the sword from the casting process, Samya and Diana started work on the next mold. The mold itself was an important and oft overlooked part of the process, and a steady hand was absolutely essential. It took longer to fix the results of a sloppy mold than to take one’s time and make the mold properly in the first place.

The swords turned out well. Quality-wise, they were just as good as the ones we'd made before. That might not sound like anything to brag about, but we had a total beginner working with us today.

Diana had been fascinated to see the swords gradually take shape and was eager to try and wield one of the finished blades. I gave her the okay, and she ran through a quick sword sequence. Her form was clean and her skills were undeniable, but she still fell short of my cheat-granted abilities.

"Not bad," I said after watching her for a while.

"Thanks," Diana replied, "but judging from what I saw last time, I wouldn't stand a chance against you."

Last time...? Aaah. When we saved her from those thugs.

"Don't be fooled by his shabby looks," Samya said with a smirk. "Eizo's quite strong."

"What do you mean by 'shabby'?" I protested.

"She has a point, Boss," Rike interjected, taking Samya's side. "Normally, a blacksmith wouldn't be expected to hold their own in a fight."

I slumped over, exaggerating my disappointment, but I managed to get laughs out of everyone.

###

We spent the next day in a similar fashion. The only difference was that I moved on to making elite models instead of working with Rike on entry-level ones. We divided tasks between the four of us and settled into a smooth rhythm.

Diana had improved remarkably, probably because of all the practice from yesterday. I inspected one of the shortswords she'd cast. The metal looked much more uniform today.

Nevertheless, it was only day two of her blacksmithing career, so while the results were better, they were far from perfect. Smoothing out the rest of the irregularities was my job, and I did it with care. The tough part for me was

making sure I didn't concentrate *too* hard on my work, lest I end up making a custom model, which was much harder to sell. The trick was to put in the perfect amount of effort so that the final product stopped at the quality of an elite model.

I finished deburring and shaping the current sword, then I quenched, buffed, and sharpened it. The finished blade was safely within the elite tier. In a sense, it was impressive that my cheat skills could still guarantee such high quality, considering that the initial cast was made by Diana, who had improved but was still a novice.

As I was inspecting the completed sword, Diana approached me. "My, how beautiful."

"Thank you. It's a tier above the shortswords we made yesterday, in terms of quality. We sell these at a high price point."

"Can I see?"

"Oh, yeah, of course. As long as you don't mind that the grip is unfinished."

Diana examined the sword closely, and I had a moment of déjà vu. Diana's image superimposed itself on top of my memory of Rike, and I recalled when I'd met the dwarf in the Open Market.

After a little while, Diana said, "This is incredible."

"Isn't it?" Rike bragged.

Shouldn't I be the one bragging?

"I was blown away the first time I saw Boss's work," she continued.

"There are few blacksmiths with your skills," Diana said in amazement. "Even in the capital, you could count them all on your fingers."

In other words, there *were* others out there who could match this level of quality. In the marketplace, my elite model swords wouldn't be seen as anything extraordinary, but merely high quality.

To tell the truth, when I'd made Helen's dual blades, I'd made them closer to elite level—a half step better than other swords sold in the market—rather than the level I could achieve when I really put my mind to it.

But of course, if I saturated the market with swords like the ones I'd made Helen, I'd start to draw unwanted attention. I had to make sure I didn't go overboard.

We stopped working once we'd forged roughly the same amount of swords as we had the day before.

"Eizo, can you do me a favor?" Diana asked as we were wrapping up.

"What is it?" I asked, curious.

"Spar with me."

I was taken aback by her request. "The two of us?"

"Yes."

"With...swords?"

"Of course. What else would we use?"

Why is everyone I meet so hot-blooded?! She probably wants to pass some time since she's not used to living here like the rest of us. It's not as if there's any other source of entertainment in this forest...

"All right, but only one round," I conceded. "It'll get dark soon." The sun was already setting outside the window.

"You're the best!" she said with glee.

Is sparring something a noblewoman would normally be excited by?

I suspected Diana may be a little different from the average ladies of her class, but seeing as she was the only one I'd ever met, I could neither prove nor disprove my hypothesis.

Diana and I took our spar session outside; the workshop wouldn't survive a sword fight. Samya and Rike joined us to watch.

I had selected an entry-level sword for our fight, just in case. It was mostly for my peace of mind—a sharp piece of metal was a sharp piece of metal. If I hit her with my full strength, she'd be in bad shape no matter what sword I used,

but at least with an entry-level model, she wouldn't end up *devastatingly* injured.

We kissed the tips of our blades together and bowed to each other before retreating to our separate sides of the field.

"Come at me anytime you like!" I called toward her.

I was relaxed, but I could see by her expression that Diana was dead serious. She readied her sword and approached me slowly. I brought up my blade languidly and waited for her to make a move.

All of a sudden, she lunged at me with such speed that it looked like she'd vanished for a moment. She slashed at my neck, her movement brutal and fierce. In my hand, my sword tip had dipped—that's what I got for not taking the fight seriously—but I jerked it upward at the last second to intercept her attack. I turned the momentum of the parry into a thrust at Diana's collarbone.

This time, she was able to deflect my attack, avoiding any damage, and ride the momentum into a counter. I widened the distance between us as I intercepted. Diana pushed forward aggressively, not letting me get away. Her every movement was quick and precise, and I could tell that she hadn't gained her level of skill from just a lesson or two.

I guess I have no choice.

"Eizo's getting serious!" Samya whooped from the sidelines.

Only a little bit.

I exhaled sharply and launched myself at Diana again.

Shoulder.

Chest.

Head.

Foot.

I took aim at her vulnerabilities, one after another. At first, Diana fended off my attacks, but then she began to visibly tire. I took advantage of her fatigue and directed a thrust at her torso.

“Hey!” Diana cried out as she brought her sword down just in time to parry mine.

But my first attack was only a ruse. When she lowered her arm, I went in for the kill...and stopped just short of her undefended neck.

“It’s my win, right?” I said.

“Fine...” Diana groused.

And, with that, I seized the gold in our one-round title match.

“I worked up a sweat!” I said as I took time to catch my breath.

Even though I had been de-aged ten years, even though my trips to the lake and smithing work kept me active...I’d overdone it this time. After all, the body of an old man could only withstand so much. During the fight two days ago, I’d been focused on eliminating my enemies as efficiently as possible, so I’d kept any unnecessary movements to a minimum. However, the match with Diana had been a full-body workout, requiring me to stress muscles that I rarely used.

Diana was gazing at me with an accusatory smoldering behind her eyes. “You were still holding back on me, weren’t you, Eizo?”

“Huh? Well, yeah,” I replied, taken aback. “There’s no need for me to go all out when my life isn’t at stake.”

“I can’t believe I lost when you weren’t even using your full abilities,” she lamented, sounding despondent.

I hastily reassured her. “You’re not bad yourself.” I wasn’t just flattering her; she *was* good, especially for someone who only had a smattering of experience.

“I’m known elsewhere as the Rose of the Duel Grounds, but Eizo describes me as ‘not bad.’”

Feels like I’m missing something here...

I called over to Samya to catch her attention.

“Hm? What’s up?” she said.

“Am I really that strong?”

“That’s a joke, right?” she responded with skepticism. “You’re unbelievably strong, you know? We could spar a hundred times, and I wouldn’t win once.”

“Seriously?”

Rike chimed in. “Your strength became obvious to me when I saw you fight Helen. You parried her blows with ease.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m not convinced.”

I was positive that Helen had been going easy on me. The Watchdog should’ve only given me the bare minimum skills I needed to defend myself. The fight with the bear...that had been self-defense too. I just didn’t want to die in this forest.

“You couldn’t possibly be talking about Lightning Blade Helen, right?” Diana asked.

I was still mid-buffer, staggered by the new information that I now had to process, but I managed to stammer out, “Y-Yeah, I think she mentioned something like that.”

“You faced down Helen and lived to tell the tale?”

“It was only for fifteen minutes,” I said.

“You survived for fifteen whole minutes?!”

I remember thinking Helen was strong, but I didn’t realize she was a legend.

“Helen’s sobriquet comes from the way her swords dance through the air as fast as lightning,” Diana went on to explain. “She made her name as a mercenary and is well known, even among the gentry.” I still hadn’t fully processed everything I was hearing. “And you didn’t just weather Helen’s strikes. You fought against her toe to toe...”

Diana trailed off as if she’d taken a blow of her own. She looked down, deep in thought.

“L-Let’s just head back inside for now. What do you say?” I suggested tentatively and went to put my hand on Diana’s shoulder.

However, where I expected her shoulder to be, there was nothing but air.

I peered down at Diana, who was suddenly kneeling. She was bent over, both knees and both hands on the ground in front of her, and her head was bowed.

I've seen this before... She's performing a dogeza! I knew it. It does exist in this world.

"Please take me on as your disciple!" Diana cried without lifting her head.

How do I keep finding myself in this situation?

I peeked over at Samya and Rike. The two of them made no effort to hide their smirks.

Don't think I'll forget this, you two.

I paused for a moment before answering. "Fine, but I'll only spar with you once a day and *only* when I've finished my work. Are you all right with that?"

"Are you sure?!"

"However! I've never properly learned any swordsmanship, and I'm not a good teacher, so you'll have to learn by doing," I clarified.

Diana instantly brightened. "Yes, of course, anything! Thanks!"

She must be quite the tomboy at home if something like this makes her so happy. I took a moment to appreciate the hard time Marius must've had taking care of Diana as a child.

One more task had made its way onto my schedule, but it wouldn't really take much time from my day. Once she grows into her skills and the fights start lasting longer, I might have to reconsider.

"Oh, there's one more thing," I said.

"What is it?"

"I forbid you from calling me 'Master' or treating me any differently." I had to kill off that seed before it sprouted, and I didn't want her making any rash decisions as Rike had.

"I got it."

So, just like that, I now had one more pupil under my wings, though this time, my teaching would be entirely unrelated to blacksmithing.

Although it was exciting to have a new disciple, it didn't change the fact that I was, first and foremost, a blacksmith. Thus, we began the next day as usual: in the workshop, forging shortswords and longswords. We divided the work exactly the same as we had the previous two days, with Samya and Diana in charge of casting, and Rike and I in charge of deburring and shaping. Today, I was forging elite models again, while Rike forged entry-level models. We closed up shop once we'd reached our quota, which was roughly the same number of swords we'd made the previous two days.

After work came my second sparring session with Diana. We were using swords again, but I'd whittled down some wood with my sharp knife to make two wooden practice swords since it was too risky to keep using metal ones. My cheat abilities extended to carving, which wasn't really blacksmithing but was, I guess, still related to production and weapon-making. The two swords didn't take me much time at all to make, but it was still fun.

We started the same way we had yesterday—by touching the tips of our swords together and bowing once. This time, I knew I had to be serious from the get-go. I focused intently on Diana and prepared for her to begin the onslaught.

Since she'd been trained in the art of swordsmanship, she was not only fast but ferocious.

I knew better than to claim my style of swordplay was stronger just because I could fend off Diana's attacks. It was my personal belief that true swordsmanship was learned on the battlefield, after risking one's life over and over again. Since I lacked that experience, I knew that my skills with the sword were only for my own benefit. I may have been granted a bit of talent, but it didn't compare to skills that were polished through hours and hours of training.

I might've had the upper hand against Diana, but only because we were sparring one-on-one. If I were facing off against a hundred opponents (an extreme example, I know) I wouldn't have even a sliver of a shot at winning; I would be instantly overwhelmed. My style of fighting wasn't a school of techniques that I could pass on to a hundred disciples.

Nevertheless, I wanted to do what I could for Diana. I might not be able to raise a swordsman from scratch, but my skills could be used to augment the training she already had...or so I wanted to believe. If all went well, our bouts would help Diana improve her skill over time.

Although...who knew if she'd even be staying with us for that long. I'd at least accompany her whenever I could while she was here.

Diana came at me today with a variety of different tactics, trying out new techniques left and right. I seemed to know instinctively what she was thinking. What attack would pierce my guard? What strategy could she use to feint successfully and sneak in a hit?

With my cheat-heightened senses, I saw through every single one of her attempts, but I could tell that she was on the right track.

There was one thing that bothered me, though. Despite my installed knowledge bank, I couldn't pinpoint how strong Diana actually was. I wasn't able to measure my own strength either.

With the blades I forged, I could always intuit the quality. However, with people...my sample size was too small, and I didn't have enough data to form a comprehensive gauge of strength. Was Diana's toughness on par with an average soldier? Or did she possess the kind of miraculous strength that was only seen once in a generation? All my installed info and cheats could tell me was that she was above average. And without a clear idea of her strength, I didn't know how far to train her.

Uneasiness filled my head as Diana and I sparred, but in the end, there was nothing to do but leave the matter for another time. We fought for the better part of an hour before calling it quits.

"What do you think? Did you learn anything?" I asked Diana afterward.

She shook her head. "No, not today. I was just testing things out," she said. "I guess you could say I learned which tactics *don't* work against you and why."

"That's something. Anyway, we've got time."

Diana looked briefly stunned by my response, but she quickly recovered and smiled gently. "Yeah, we do."

The next day, Rike and I moved on from swords to knives. Although Samya was also familiar with the knife smithing process, I asked her to accompany Diana on a trip to forage for fruit and berries. I was sure they'd be safe as long as they went together, but I nonetheless cautioned them: *turn right around if you sense the presence of another person.*

After they'd left, Rike and I got to work. Roughly speaking, there were three parts to forging a knife: hammering out the metal plate, shaping the blade, and adding finishing touches. Without Samya our efficiency had decreased, but we worked hard to ensure the quality of the knives was up to our usual standard. With just the two of us, I was working exclusively on elite model knives while Rike handled the entry-levels. She focused primarily on her own task, but I wanted to work with her as well so she could observe me and steal whatever techniques she could.

At the moment, we were working on an elite model. "What do you think?" I asked.

She stopped to consider. "I think I'm still far from reaching your level."

"As you should be!" I laughed. "As your teacher, I'd be ashamed if you caught up to me after only a month."

She frowned, then grumbled, "But I want to improve faster."

"Should we plan for you to assist me tomorrow then?" I suggested.

"Is that all right?"

"Definitely. I have to make this apprenticeship worth it for you."

"I suppose." Her tone was light, but her expression still seemed troubled.

"I've said this before but, with your talent, you'll go far as a blacksmith. I know that progress might seem slow, and it's natural to become impatient, but it's also important to grow skills at your own pace... Without rushing."

Hearing my words, the clouds of discontent disappeared from her face, and the sunshine of her smile shone through. "Yes, Boss!"

Samya and Diana returned as Rike and I were cleaning up the workshop. They must've not run into anyone, seeing as they'd stayed out so long.

Surely, they must've come back with a bountiful harvest!

"We're home!" Samya called as she came inside.

"Welcome home, Samya," I greeted as usual, "and to you too, Diana."

"Good to be back," Diana said. "The forest around here is so rich and diverse."

"We're the only ones who live out here, so there's no one to compete with for resources." That was just my theory though.

The two of them had brought back this world's equivalent of apples and raspberries, both of which I'd seen before, as well as an exciting, new variety of fruit. It had dark, smooth skin and was a spot-on replica of a fig. Contrary to my expectations, they hadn't harvested much. Not that it was a problem per se, since it would be wasteful if the fruit rotted before we could finish our stash.

Let's see. Using these, what can I make for dinner today?

I had fig dishes on my mind as Diana and I went outside for our daily match. I'd proposed taking the day off, assuming that Diana must've been exhausted from walking around so much, but she'd insisted on training. We fought for a little less than half an hour. As I expected, Diana's fatigue slowed down her movements, so there was little point in sparring for any longer.

Diana seemed disappointed that she hadn't made any improvement, but it'd only been three days. There was no way anyone could grow stronger in such a short time.

At the end of our match, I told her, "You don't need to push yourself so hard. Take as long as you need."

Same as yesterday, a startled expression flashed across her face before she hesitantly nodded.

Dinner ended up being flatbread and soup as usual, but I decided to serve the figs as dessert, taking Samya's advice that they were good to eat raw. After we'd finished up dinner and cleared the dishes, we all tried the figs. It was the

first time that Rike, Diana, and I had tried this fruit. The skin was thicker than the skin of the ones back on Earth, but they were still peelable by hand, and their taste was identical to that of their Earth counterparts. Everyone agreed that they were delicious.

“They have such a nostalgic flavor. Sweet and floral,” I said, trying not to give too much away. “I didn’t realize they grew around here.”

“They’re very rare,” Samya replied, “but there’re enough in the area for us to enjoy once in a while.”

“Aaah, a delicacy.”

“Yup, you got it.”

Now I know why the two of them took so long to come home. I bet these figs would go great with sugar. We wouldn’t have to worry about the fruit spoiling if I could make them into jam. Too bad I didn’t get a good look at the price of the sugar that Camilo sells.

Camilo did stock sugar, but I’d only seen it fleetingly, so I couldn’t remember the price off the top of my head. I had the feeling it wasn’t cheap though, and to make jam, I would need quite a lot. I’d have to remember to ask him when things calm down.

We spent the rest of the night chatting. I asked Diana about fruits she’d eaten in the capital. She mentioned something that sounded like watermelon, which Samya and Rike had told me about previously, but she’d also tasted strawberries and bananas.

I want to try them all, but I suppose that’ll have to wait for later.

###

Samya and Diana went out hunting the next day. We still had some reserves of meat, so their goal was to take down a single animal.

Diana had eschewed her usual refined clothing for a simple outfit. She said that she’d been hunting several times when she’d lived in the capital, but I had a feeling that this trip was going to be different from her previous ones.

Since when was hunting a popular activity with women? She’s a true tomboy

at heart. I'll have to ask Marius about it the next time I see him.

Rike and I were forging knives again. Like I'd promised yesterday, she was helping me with the elite models. Well, more like observing.

I heated a plate of metal in the firebed and transferred it to the anvil, where I carefully hammered out any distortions and unevenness. Rike watched my movements studiously and took note of my every action, from where I was looking to where I was hitting. Once I'd hammered out the obvious flaws and the metal was more or less even, I had Rike examine the result.

"This is the quality of an elite model," I said. "I can make the metal even more uniform, but I'll leave it like this..." *No, wait.* "Never mind, I'm going to keep going."

"Why are you changing your mind, Boss?"

"It would be useful for Diana."

"Yes, that's a good idea."

"Watch carefully," I said.

With enthusiasm, Rike replied, "I will! Thank you!"

I reheated the metal and carefully smoothed out the remaining flaws. The process took time, patience, and several rounds of heating and hammering. Eventually, this produced a perfectly uniform sheet of metal. By the time I'd finished, the surface was beautifully smooth and it gleamed in the light.

I showed Rike the sheet. "This is what it looks like when the metal is perfectly even."

She looked at the metal, her eyes glittering like the sparkle of fireworks in the night. She slowly scanned the sheet from corner to corner as if she was unwilling to skip over a single molecule.

What was the fundamental difference between Rike's work and mine? Because of my cheats, the answer was obvious to me, but Rike didn't have the same benefit. From here on out, she'll just have to learn what she can from me.

With Rike still watching and thinking about how to improve her own work, I moved on to the next stage of the process: shaping. Thanks to my cheat

abilities, I knew exactly where and how to hit the metal—I needed it to take on the shape of a blade without wrecking the uniformity of the metal itself. Rike liked to say that I could hear the voice of the metal.

She didn't take her eyes off my hands even once as I worked. I knew that she was trying to take in all of my techniques from start to finish.

Once the knife had taken shape, I showed it to Rike. "What do you see?"

"The composition of the metal is unchanged from before," she answered.

"Exactly right. I'll finish it up now."

"All right."

I had to heat the knife one more time to prepare it for quenching, so I stoked the flames in the firebed to raise the metal to the right temperature.

"I can tell the temperature of the blade by looking at the metal and the fire, but that may be a unique skill of mine. You might find it better to do this step at night, when the subtle changes in the fire's color will be more obvious."

"There will be no need for that. As a dwarf, I'm able to distinguish the general temperature from the color. I'll try it now," she said.

Oh right. I suppose we usually do this part together anyway.

"Okay, watch carefully then."

"Yes, Boss." Her voice was low, and she concentrated on the flames.

I also turned my attention to the fire. The temperature was rising slowly, one degree at a time.

Getting close... Almost... That's it! Right now!

I quickly yanked the knife from the fire and dunked it into cold water.

"That was the correct temperature," I said.

"Yes. I thought so. The time will differ depending on the item though, right?"

"Yup, that's right. Let's move on."

Next up was tempering, a vital step to increase the toughness of the metal. This step also required precise control of the flames. I instructed Rike as I

worked, pointing out the right timings and temperatures.

Last came the polishing and sharpening. As before, Rike watched intently the entire time while I concentrated on grinding the blade. In a way, you could say this was the most important step—a knife was useless if it wasn't sharp.

The knife turned out spectacularly because I'd become practiced at forging, or maybe because my cheats and I were old friends by now. "This may be one of the best knives I've made so far." I passed it to Rike.

"I see... To me, it looks like it's about the same quality as the one you made for me, or maybe slightly better."

Rike hadn't been there to watch me back then; I wished I could've demonstrated my process earlier.

"Well, now you know what to work toward."

"Yes, I'll do my best, Boss."

"I know you will," I said with a smile. Her journey as a budding young blacksmith had just begun, and I wished her nothing but great luck and fortune.

After I finished making the custom model knife with Rike observing, I made several elite model knives before the day was over. Samya and Diana returned right when I'd decided to call it a day.

"Welcome back. Did you catch anything?" I asked.

"I'm home," Samya said. "Our prey today was a large tree deer."

"Fantastic. And welcome back to you too, Diana."

"I'm back. And I'm exhausted!"

"Oh? Why?"

"I had her act as the beater," Samya explained. A beater's role was to drive the game into the waiting arrows of the hunter, which meant that Diana must've been running around the whole day. It would've been quite tiring, especially in the forest where the footing was bad. Who knew Samya was so merciless?

“I’m tired just imagining it,” I said. “Is it safe to say that we should take a day off from sparring?”

“Yeah. I’m too worn out to put up a good fight.”

“I would be too if I were in your shoes. We’ll skip it for today. Rike and I still have to clean up the workshop before I make dinner, so you two can take a break and clean off in your rooms.”

“Will do!” Diana said.

“Mmkay.” Samya nodded and the two of them headed off toward the kitchen together.

I turned to Rike. “Let’s go tidy up.”

“Yes, Boss.”

And thus, the day came to an end.

###

Early the next morning, we set off as a group of four into the forest. I carried the water jars with me and Samya had coils of rope. Rike had an ax in hand, and I couldn’t help thinking, as usual, that the ax made her look extra dwarf-like. It was a ridiculous thought because dwarfness was a binary trait, not a sliding scale, and Rike was definitely a dwarf.

Diana was the only one who walked empty-handed. She was so excited that she was practically skipping. Was she just looking forward to bringing back the deer she (and Samya) had caught yesterday?

I’d already stopped questioning whether she was a tomboy or not. The answer was obvious by now.

Today, we had another pair of eyes to watch out for any signs of danger, so there was an extra sense of security. I doubted that many animals would attack a group of four humans; we weren’t easy prey, and it would be abnormal for anything to hunt us.

It had been six days since we’d taken Diana in. Karel and his allies would no doubt soon realize—if they hadn’t already—that the thugs they’d dispatched had failed to seize Diana. They would then start searching for her whereabouts,

and it wasn't out of the question that the Black Forest would become an area of interest. Given the perilous nature of the forest, it would take any pursuers time to traverse, but I worried that our chimney smoke would give our location away. They could follow the smoke straight to our home, just as Helen had when she'd come to commission her swords. I would have to figure out a solution to that particular problem, and soon.

I let my mind wander as we walked. Before long, we'd arrived at the lake's shores. Samya, Diana, and I waded into the water to drag the tree deer onto land, and Rike cut down a couple of the nearby trees. I worked with Rike to make a carrying platform, while Samya and Rike filled the water jugs. Finally, we all combined our strengths to heave the deer onto the platform and pull it back to the cabin. With the four of us working together, the return journey was twenty percent faster than usual.

Back at the cabin, Samya, Rike, and I butchered the deer without Diana's help. We were all used to the task already, so we made short work of it. The deer collapsed into a small mountain of meat in the blink of an eye.

"I never knew this was how meat was made," Diana said. Her tone was an equal mix of admiration and contemplation.

"Yeah, this is normally how we carve up the body," I replied.

A normal lady would've likely fainted while watching us take apart the deer.

That said, I realized that Diana had already seen Samya dress a deer yesterday. She must have nerves of steel, considering she barely batted an eye at the gristle and gore.

"It's hard to believe that this pile of meat is the same living, breathing deer that I helped Samya bring down yesterday."

"Yup, and it's the same as the meat that's been filling your belly day-to-day."

"You're right..." she said before sinking into silence. She looked like she was thinking hard. It wasn't every day that one watched an animal being butchered. Even for a commoner, it was a rare experience, and for an upper-class lady, it was practically unthinkable.

“Personally, I think it’s a meaningful way to honor the life that we’ve taken,” I said.

“Huh... To honor its life?”

“Yes. We owe our continued breath and spirit to its sacrifice.” I hadn’t meant to preach, but sentimentality was an unavoidable side effect of aging.

“I understand,” Diana said.

“You sound like my grandpa, Eizo,” Samya said out of the blue, and her words pierced me straight through my heart.

“That’s just what I’ve been taught,” I responded weakly.

“The philosophy in the north is surprisingly close to what we beastfolk believe,” Samya noted with admiration.

“I can’t speak for all of the north, but I grew up believing that everything in this world has a soul, no matter if it’s living or not.” Naturally, this was a belief I held from my life in Japan, not the Nordic region of this world.

“What about the forest?”

“Yes, the forest has a soul, and so does each individual tree growing inside of it. That’s why we must practice gratitude toward every tree we cut down and repurpose for our own needs, and toward the forest itself for allowing us to live here. That was what my granddad taught me. Of course, it applies to more than just trees.”

“That’s amazing,” Diana said appreciatively.

I hadn’t wanted to influence the culture or customs of this world, but having lived in Japan for forty years, the beliefs were a part of me.

I broke the reverent silence of the room by declaring brightly, “Let’s enjoy our vacation day! I’ll cook up the venison for lunch, and afterward, we can work on our individual projects.”

Samya jumped on my suggestion. “Great, can’t wait!”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Rike said with a smile.

Diana looked confused. “What kind of projects?”

Rike and Samya both said, “You’ll find out after lunch.”

The four of us brought the meat into the house. I set aside a portion for today’s lunch and dinner. The rest we would make into jerky or cure with salt.

For lunch, I reprised the venison steak with raspberry sauce that had been so popular last time. As usual, I served it with flatbread and soup. Next time, I’d like to try my hand at making raisin bread or rye bread.

Right before we started eating, Diana said, “Did people in the north...or rather, did your family say anything before meals to give thanks, Eizo?”

“We did... Hmm, why not? Let’s try it. Put your hands together, palm to palm.”

The three of them did as I had instructed.

“Itadakimasu,” I said.

They repeated the phrase in unison. *“Itadakimasu.”*

“What does it mean?” Samya asked afterward.

“It means, ‘I humbly accept,’” I explained. “As in, ‘I humbly accept this deer’s life, the blessings of nature, the meal which has been prepared for me.’ It’s an expression of gratitude.”

“All right then,” Samya said. “I’ll say it before meals from now on. You are the head of the house and all.”

“I don’t mind, of course. What about the two of you?” I asked Diana and Rike.

“I’ll say it too,” Diana agreed.

“And I as well, Boss,” said Rike.

From then on, our little household would practice the Japanese custom of starting meals with an *“itadakimasu”* and ending them with *“gochisosama.”*

###

The butchering was our only work for the day, so the afternoon consisted of free time for us to do whatever we wanted.

I wanted to make some arrowheads. Samya had more than enough to work with, but I anticipated that Diana would be needing some too. Since I was already going to be firing up the forge, Rike accompanied me so she could practice forging knives.

Samya and Rike trained archery in the garden, which was a fancy term for the patch of grass in front of the cabin. The two of them were getting along famously, whether it was because their personalities clicked to begin with, or because of the time they'd spent together hunting. They were both the type to get along with people, no matter who they were.

Around four, I finished up my smithing work, ready to spar with Diana. Considering it had only been a few days, there were no miraculous improvements in her swordwork, but I hoped that she was picking up at least something from me.

For dinner, I grilled up thin slices of the venison and glazed it with a fig and white wine sauce. The dish was sweet and salty and pretty decent overall. The other three all raved about the taste.

###

According to our weekly schedule, we were slated to make a trip into the city to drop off new inventory at Camilo's. Needless to say, we would have to leave Diana behind; we couldn't risk anyone recognizing her.

The best course of action would be for Diana to remain alone in the cabin while Samya, Rike, and I traveled to the city. That way, we wouldn't be deviating from our normal schedule and would be less likely to raise any suspicions. However! Should the worst come to pass, I wanted one person to stay with Diana.

Who's the best candidate to guard her?

I was out of the question, so that left Samya and Rike. Since Rike's combat skills and knowledge of the forest were both limited, Samya was undoubtedly the best candidate. Samya could also take Diana and hide in the forest if anything were to happen. I was sure there were places she'd previously used as dens, places where the two of them could shelter for a few days.

Without Samya keeping guard on the road, I would have to be hypervigilant, and if push came to shove, well, I was apparently no slouch with a sword.

I explained my proposal to the others, and they all agreed to the plan.

“Fine by me. There’s no other option that I can think of,” Samya commented.

Diana was apologetic. “I’m sorry to cause you all so much trouble.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I reassured her. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“That’s right!” Rike backed me up. “You have to look out for yourself first and foremost, Diana.”

“Thank you all so much,” Diana said, tears brimming in her eyes.

Marius, please figure out a solution to your family’s feud soon!

Before Rike and I headed out, I took from Diana the letter that Marius had written to Camilo. Five days had passed since Diana was supposed to have arrived at Camilo’s store, so Marius was probably worried sick by now. After all, no one knew that Diana was with me, except for the four of us.

“We’re heading out now,” I said as Rike and I left the cabin.

Samya and Diana saw us off. “Come home safe.”

As Rike and I headed into the forest, I turned to her. “Make sure you keep your guard up. Without Samya, we’re short one valuable pair of eyes watching our back.”

“I understand, Boss.”

I estimated that it would take one and a half times longer than usual to make the trip. We took our time trekking through the forest. Luckily, Camilo and I had never set a specific time for me to arrive at his shop, so we could take as long as we needed.

We stopped to rest twice. A little over three hours from when we’d first set off, we finally emerged on the main road into the city. The first leg of the journey usually took us only two hours.

Before we set foot onto the road, we remained cloaked in tree cover and

checked for any suspicious activity, but all was clear. Without further delay, we left the forest. Since we now had a clear line of sight on the road, we eased our guard ever so slightly. This road wasn't guaranteed to be safe, though, so we couldn't afford to be *too* lax.

We soon came to the place where Diana had been ambushed. In the week since the incident, all traces of the fight had disappeared. It was likely that we four were the only ones who knew what happened to the thugs that had attacked Diana.

"There's nothing here," I said to Rike.

"Yes, there's not a single thing left to suggest that anything happened," she replied.

"Thank god we'll be able to escape suspicion at the very least."

"It would be quite the nuisance if we were to be questioned by soldiers now, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, it'd be a pain."

We talked as we walked and eventually made it into town without running across any trouble. The entire journey took way longer than normal, so I knew that our trip was going to eat up the entire day.

Marius was absent from the front gate, though, now that I knew the circumstance, I hadn't expected him to be there. The guard I'd come to recognize wasn't on duty either, so we passed through the gate with only a short greeting to the guard who was working. We made a beeline for Camilo's store. Had the usual guard been on duty, he might have been suspicious of our evident haste, but that was neither here nor there.

Supposing that Diana's pursuers happened to be roaming the area, it was unlikely that they would stop to interrogate a random blacksmith who was only here to drop off goods. Indeed, Rike and I made it to Camilo's shop without being assaulted.

We first wheeled our cart around to the storage area and, as usual, left the knives and swords to the store workers. One of the clerks called for Camilo and the negotiations proceeded in short order. After we'd settled on the price, I

quickly changed the subject. "I have something I need to discuss with you."

"Oh? What is it?"

Without responding, I glanced meaningfully at the head clerk who was still in the room with us. Camilo immediately picked up on my signal and dismissed the clerk with an eye signal of his own. He quickly left the room, the door shutting behind him with a quiet click.

I took Marius's letter from my pocket. "I've been entrusted with this letter. The letter's owner gave me permission to read it, so I've already verified the contents, but you should take a look."

"Oh, really?" Camilo took the opened envelope and removed the letter. His brows furrowed together as soon as he began reading. After he finished, he sighed deeply and said, "Can I make an assumption? The reason this letter came into your possession is the same reason why only two of you came in today?"

"Yes, it's just as you suspect. Diana is staying with us and has already told us everything. And I'm guessing that you already knew the story long before this?" I asked him.

"Yeah. I just didn't want to get you involved."

"Alas, here we are." I briefly explained the unfortunate circumstances behind how Diana and the three of us had met.

"It's truly fortunate that she was rescued by you. Certainly a stroke of luck that no one could have predicted."

"Yeah, we were able to take her in directly."

"You'd better leave this letter with me," Camilo said. "I'll dispose of it."

"Thanks, I'm counting on you. I wish I could do more to help Marius, but I'm an outcast with no family ties or connections. Regardless of my skills as a blacksmith, someone with my background has no right interfering with the quarrels of nobility."

If there was any way I could support Marius in his time of need, I would jump right on it, but the reality was that a mere blacksmith like me wouldn't be allowed to interfere with people in Marius and Diana's class, not even from the

shadows.

Camilo nodded his agreement with my assessment. “That’s true.”

“Of course, if there’s anything I can do as a blacksmith, I’m happy to,” I continued. “But the other problem is that I’m only here once a week. I’m afraid that by the time I hear any news, it’ll already be too late for me to help. On the other hand, coming here more frequently could attract the wrong sort of attention, and then my efforts would all be for naught. Do you know of any other way to keep in contact on a daily basis?”

Camilo didn’t respond and seemed deep in thought. Finally, I couldn’t wait anymore and prodded, “I’m already neck-deep in this mess, so it’s too late for you to try and spare me any trouble.”

“That, I can’t deny,” Camilo conceded. He then taught me how to contact him.

Rike and I left Camilo’s store and started back home, taking our usual resupply along with us: ore, charcoal, salt, and wine, along with dried root vegetables and a small stock of black pepper.

We bid farewell to the guard at the gate. Now that I thought about it, the fact that Marius’s friend wasn’t on duty today was a blessing in disguise. Since this guard hadn’t ever seen us before, he didn’t know that we usually came with three people, not two.

We proceeded slowly and carefully, so the journey back to the cabin took longer than usual. It was late by the time we returned, but at least we hadn’t encountered any trouble along the way.

I greeted Samya and Diana when we arrived. “We’re back.”

“Welcome home, Eizo,” Samya said in return. Diana chimed in as well.

The two of them came out of the house to help us unload the cart. Samya and Rike worked together to bring the ore and charcoal into the workshop, while Diana and I stored the foodstuffs in the kitchen.

“Could this be pepper?” Diana asked as we carried in the supplies.

“Yeah. Camilo had it in stock, so I thought, why not? We don’t need a

barrelful or anything like that. With pepper, a little goes a long way.”

“It sounds like you’ve eaten dishes seasoned with pepper before.”

“Aaah...” *Damn me and my big mouth!*

The pepper hadn’t been unreasonably expensive. It wasn’t worth its weight in gold or anything. However, owing to the climate of the region, there weren’t many places where the spice could be cultivated, so it was considered a high-end seasoning. That was to say, pepper wasn’t part of the average person’s diet. I couldn’t even lie and say that I’d happened to try it once; my explanation had clearly given me away as someone who’d eaten it regularly.

“It’s a long story and not one I usually tell...but I actually have a family name,” I admitted. “My full name is Eizo Tanya.”

“I figured that was the case,” Diana said. “I suspected that ever since I saw you use magic.”

“Unfortunately, my background is a bit complicated, so there’s no way I could use my family connections to help the Eimoor family right now.”

That was the understatement of the century. In this world, there wasn’t a single person who was related to me by blood. On the off chance that there was a family with the same family name as mine, the only thing we would have in common is the Tanya name, so asking them for help would be out of the question.

“Do the other two know?” Diana asked.

“Yes, but I’ve asked them to keep it a secret. That’s probably why they haven’t told you,” I explained. “I’d appreciate it if you could keep this info under wraps. I don’t want to invite any trouble.”

“Of course I will. I can empathize with the inconveniences that come with having a family name.”

“Inconvenience” was one word for what her family was going through. I see that Diana’s a master of understatement as well.

We got everything sorted and stored away properly. “All right, we’re done here for today,” I said.

“Perfect,” Diana replied.

“I’ll pull out all the stops for dinner tonight,” I promised.

“Looking forward to it.”

I felt soothed by the warm smile she turned my way.

That night, I seasoned our usual soup with a dash of pepper. In addition, I grilled up a few slices of meat. I’d cured them yesterday, but since it hadn’t been long, I was able to remove some of the salt. I seasoned the meat lightly with pepper as well.

When Samya tried a bite, she said “Deeelicious!” with a wide grin. Beastfolk usually lived highly independent and self-sufficient lives, so she wouldn’t have encountered pepper in the past. Even salt was a rarity since the beastfolk usually preserved food by drying.

Rike was happy to try something different as well. “It’s just like you said, Boss. The one ingredient made all the difference!” Her family had cured meat with salt, but they hadn’t needed pepper. Male dwarves were apparently gluttons, so a reserve of pepper would be depleted in no time if they used it to season all the food. Rike had explained this, laughing.

“This is just the right amount of pepper,” Diana commented. “I prefer this to the dishes I’ve had before.” She said that it was the culinary trend among the nobility to season dishes aggressively with pepper and nothing but. I don’t think I’d want to eat such a dish, even if it were offered to me.

In any case, I didn’t know whether pepper was a regular part of Camilo’s stock, but I decided to buy it when I saw it from now on.

###

After I refilled our water supply the next morning, I headed straight into the forest, leaving the three women behind to eat breakfast and forge swords—both short and long—by themselves.

All was muted among the trees. Early mornings in the Black Forest were quiet to begin with, but today, the silence was profound and impenetrable. As I wound my way through the woods, padding through the undergrowth, I

couldn't help but feel like I was the only one awake in the forest. My soft footsteps sounded unbearably loud.

Since I was traveling alone today, I had my hunting knife and shortsword. Even practicing the necessary precautions, I could move quickly if I chose to. The problem was that the faster I moved, the more noise I made, so I purposefully dropped my speed as I walked to the forest entrance.

The trip took significantly less time than it usually did. When I arrived, I picked out a tree and scrambled up its trunk. I hadn't climbed trees as a child, but luckily, my cheats and installed knowledge made themselves useful once again. I hid myself from sight in the tree's canopy and settled in to watch the road.

I did my best to remain still. It was easy at first, but after an hour, my old bones and worn muscles started to complain about their advanced age. I had very little freedom to move around since I didn't want to give away my position with an ill-timed rustle. All I could do was move my body inch by inch to try and alleviate some of the soreness.

"This must be what a sniper feels like," I mumbled, "waiting around, watching over everyone and everything."

Several people passed beneath me over the course of the next hour, but none were of any interest. Another hour passed before the person I was waiting for came by. He was traveling alone, coming from the city, and he stopped close to my hiding place, glancing around furtively. Once he'd made sure that no one was around, he crouched by the side of the road and hid something in the thicket, before continuing on toward the capital.

I waited until the sight of his back faded off into the distance, checked to see if there was anyone else nearby, and then descended from the tree. I wasted no time running to the place in the road where he'd stopped. After searching through the thicket, I recovered the bag that the man had hidden and then beat a hasty retreat back into the forest.

When I was sure I could no longer be seen from the road, I opened the bag. Inside was a slip of paper and a light green ribbon; written on the paper were the words, "Confirm that you've received this."

I took a writing utensil from inside my breast pocket and wrote, "Confirmed."

Then, I returned to the road. I tied the ribbon to a branch where it was visible only if one was looking for it, then hid the letter a little ways away from the ribbon. With my errand completed, I retreated into the forest and headed home.

This was the contact method Camilo had taught me. He employed both people, and they traveled between the city and the capital every day, so I could communicate with Camilo via the letters hidden on the roadside.

The couriers would hide any messages from Camilo; I would hide my responses in a similar location and mark the position with the provided ribbon. A courier coming from the capital would retrieve my letter and deliver it to Camilo.

It was convoluted, but it would allow me to exchange messages with Camilo once a day without necessitating my presence in the city, or Camilo's presence in the forest. In an emergency, Camilo could come in person. But by that point, it wouldn't matter if we were seen or not.

I would now know if Marius ever needed me to help with anything, though whether I could fulfill his request was a different story.

After I returned to the cabin, I ate lunch with Samya, Rike, and Diana, and in the afternoon, I joined them in the workshop to forge some swords. They hadn't made as many in the morning as we normally would've, but that was to be expected since they were short one person. Nevertheless, they had made enough to keep us afloat. Even factoring in the additional cost of pepper, we only needed to make half our usual output to put food on the table for the four of us.

"This is our new routine for the foreseeable future," I said. "Will you all be all right by yourselves?"

"I think so. We'll end up making more entry-level models than usual, but there isn't any problem that I can see," Rike responded.

"I feel the same," I agreed.

Rike took on the brunt of the forging work, so I could jump straight into making elite model swords. We'd do the same for knives later on. Until the

situation in the capital was resolved, I had no choice but to leave the smithing work in Rike's hands.

After we'd finished smithing, it was time for my daily sparring session with Diana.

Her movements have gotten better, but it's still too early for her to best me in a match. Anyway, there's no need to rush the process. Hopefully I can teach her something useful before all of this is over.

Once we'd worked up a sweat, I prepared dinner and we ate together as usual, drawing the day to a close. The plan for tomorrow was the same: wait for Camilo's correspondence in the morning and work in the afternoon.

Side Story: In the Capital

Marius returned to the capital immediately upon receiving the news of his father's and elder brother's deaths. After returning home, he and his two remaining siblings were immediately embroiled in funeral preparations, with talks of the family succession waiting in the wings. He didn't have a single moment to catch his breath.

The transition to the next generation was supposed to have been an amicable affair. Marius, like everyone else, had been under the assumption that Karel would succeed their father, but the reality proved to be not so clean-cut.

Marius remembered the moment with perfect clarity; he could recall Karel's exact reaction upon finding out that Marius was to inherit the countship.

"That's impossible," Karel had stated hollowly.

But his astonishment had soon morphed into resentment when he'd turned to glare at Marius. Karel, the jovial brother who always had a smile ready for anyone, at any time, was now nowhere to be seen.

Although the news was just as much of a shock to Marius, it didn't stop Karel from marking him as a sworn enemy from that point on. Marius was heartbroken and disturbed by his brother's sudden change in attitude. Since when had Karel been so interested in the succession? The man Marius had grown up with would've accepted the news with grace. Marius could imagine him saying, "That's too bad. You, Diana, and I will just have to work together to continue the good name of the Eimoor family. I'm counting on you, family head."

Where did his animosity and enmity come from?

Marius didn't get a chance to find out the answer. Karel immediately declared his opposition to Marius's succession and then left the family estate.

The machinery of succession ground to a halt—as long as there was opposition, the proceedings couldn't continue. It would've been a different

story if the objection had come from a third party, but Karel was the second son of the Eimoor family.

Marius may have been first in the line of succession on paper, but if he were discredited, he would no longer be eligible to inherit the estate. Soon, small (and not-so-small) incidents started cropping up around Marius, likely instigated by Karel to undermine him.

On the minor side were defamatory documents claiming he had knocked up a woman during his time as a city guard and had tossed aside both her and her unborn child. Marius could do nothing but laugh with disbelief at the sheer gall, but then several “credible sources” had popped out of the woodwork to back the claim, and Marius had had to bring out concrete proof that he’d done no such thing.

On the major side, there were accusations of attempted assassination. The claim lacked many witnesses, so the rumors petered out before getting too out of hand. However, another rumor started spreading around the same time, claiming that Marius was rotten and certainly treacherous enough to be planning an assassination. Marius had needed to work fast to, once again, prove his innocence.

These sorts of incidents repeated themselves over and over. Marius squashed each and every one, but they all ate up his time.

Then, the day came when Karel started to target Diana.

To Marius, it seemed like Karel’s paranoia had finally reached its peak; the fact that Marius would now have to invest time protecting Diana was, no doubt, also part of the reason.

Everything culminated in a final incident, which Karel was already making a big fuss about and spinning to his own advantage. It was obvious to Marius that Karel had been pulling the strings from the very beginning, but he had no concrete evidence. Marius couldn’t dawdle here, or else Karel would get what he wanted; haste was crucial, but Marius’s hands were tied. And, more than haste, he needed to figure out what solution to enact. Wasn’t there any sort of secret, miraculous ploy that could solve all his problems?

“If I had a magical solution, I would’ve used it already,” Marius said bitterly to

himself, wearing a strained smile. After all, solutions didn't grow on trees.

Or did they?

"Wait... There just may be a cure to my woes..."

It had slipped his mind, but there was one person he could ask for help—a blacksmith of unbelievable talent living in the Black Forest. That person would undoubtedly lend his strength. Marius didn't want to use a person like a mere tool, but he didn't have the luxury to waste time on philosophy.

Marius sighed deeply. With resolve burning in his eyes, he picked up his pen and started to write.

Chapter 3: Resolution

The next three days were quiet. The letters between Camilo and me were perfunctory and uninteresting. In the afternoons, I took advantage of my time at the cabin to work on replenishing our inventory; in the evenings, I sparred with Diana, ate dinner, then turned in for the night. We were able to forge a fair amount of shortswords, longswords, and knives before our routine was broken on the fourth day.

That morning, I left the cabin early and headed to the forest's edge just as I had the previous days. When I arrived, I chose a tree with a good view of the road and climbed into it. There, I sat and watched for the courier, who came as usual and hid the letter from Camilo nearby. I retrieved it and slunk back into the forest to read it, away from prying eyes.

The letter read, "Prepare for a journey to the capital tomorrow. I'll be picking you up. Bring any smithing equipment that you deem indispensable. I'll explain everything on the way."

There was an urgency in the words. I figured that Camilo hadn't come to tell me in person because he'd planned to pick me up tomorrow. It was now too late in the day for me to meet him in the city anyway.

Judging by the letter, I assumed that Camilo wanted me to forge something in the capital. As long as it was helpful to Marius's cause, I was ready to do everything in my power as a blacksmith.

He had written to bring my "indispensable" equipment, but the only thing that was truly vital was the magical furnace. Obviously, I wouldn't be able to lug the entire furnace to the capital, nor did I think that was quite what Camilo had in mind. Other than that, there wasn't anything else I could think to bring.

Maybe my hammer? I have gotten used to its weight and grip... But wouldn't my cheats help me overcome any awkwardness with new equipment?

I dashed off an affirmation, hid my responding letter, and tied the signal

ribbon in the thicket nearby. Then I started back home.

Back in the cabin, I informed the other three over lunch that I would be making a journey into the capital. "I'm counting on you all to watch the house while I'm gone. I don't know how long I'll be away, but if it's going to be longer than two weeks, I'll try to make a trip back to let you know."

"What do you want us to do about the smithing work?" Rike asked.

"Please keep working as you have been," I instructed. "We have plenty of raw material, so there should be no problems in the short term. We have enough meat in storage too, right?"

"Yeah," Samya confirmed. "If we run low, I can always go hunting and bring us back some more."

"Thanks. I appreciate it. You can put a pause to the trips into the city for the time being since Camilo won't be around anyway. We've taken a break before, so it won't raise any suspicions, even if we don't show up this week."

"Got it." Samya paused briefly before continuing, her voice laced with steel. "You have to come back safe, okay?"

I kept my tone light and easy. "Of course I will. And Diana, you have to promise that you won't leave here."

"I promise," she said. "I'm sorry to burden you with my family's issues."

"I meant what I said before. Don't worry about it."

"Okay, I'll try..." But her words didn't match her demeanor. She still seemed dejected.

"Seriously, I owe your brother a favor, so I'm just paying him back," I said, striving for cheerfulness.

Diana's expression brightened when she heard my words, so I assumed they had an effect.

"Anyway, all of that can wait until tomorrow. As for today, there's still work left to do!"

We finished lunch and moved to the workshop. I was the only one who could

forge elite models, so I needed to make them while I had the time. My focus for the day was on elite model knives. I worked as quickly as possible, and thanks to my cheats, I was able to maintain nearly the same level of quality throughout.

I churned them out one after another. In the course of a single afternoon, I produced about twenty percent more knives than I usually made in an entire day. This amount was enough to bring to Camilo after our business in the capital was settled.

I prepared a fancy dinner that night. It felt something like a send-off party on the night before an expedition, and it was the last dinner I'd be making for some time. Starting tomorrow, someone else would have to take over dinner duty.

###

The next morning, I settled onto my perch in the tree at the forest's border and then dug into my breakfast: a flatbread sandwich with thinly sliced cured pork. I'd packed light and wasn't carrying much besides my usual self-defense knife; if anything happened in the capital, I didn't want to risk having to abandon my hammer.

As I enjoyed my meal, I kept one eye on the road. Before long, I saw something off in the distance.

I wonder if that's Camilo?

The shadowy speck grew larger and larger before it finally resolved into a horse-drawn wagon (though it was more or less just a large luggage cart pulled by horses). It was coming my way.

I scarfed down the rest of the sandwich and tried to focus on the driver's face.

That's definitely Camilo.

I assured myself that there was no one else around before descending the tree and remaining in the shadows, waiting for the cart to approach. The cart drew close before Camilo brought it to a stop. He disembarked and circled around to the back.

I kept alert for any unwanted visitors and then made my way up to Camilo,

light and quick on my feet. “Hey!”

“Hello, Eizo.” There were no hints of surprise on his face or in his voice. “Sorry about the short notice. Get in.”

“Sure thing.” I clambered onto the back of the cart with the cargo and sat down near the driver’s seat. Camilo climbed up next to me and urged the horses to move with a flick of the reins. It wasn’t long before we were flying along at full speed.

This wagon is much faster than I gave it credit for.

“Let me give you the short version of the story,” Camilo began, yelling to be heard over the pounding of the horses’ hooves. “I need to commission a sword from you.”

“Not a problem,” I yelled back. “How fast do you need it?”

“By the end of the day. Tomorrow, if absolutely necessary. It has to be high quality.”

He’s asking for a custom model sword then.

“Can you tell me the circumstances?”

“Marius’s family—the Eimoor family—has a sword which is an heirloom treasure, and that sword was recently stolen,” Camilo explained. “Upon further investigation, it seems to have been an inside job. The culprit took advantage of an opening that few people have knowledge of. Marius suspects it was all part of Karel’s scheme.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“I’m getting to it. You see, since the heirloom was stolen under Marius’s watch, Karel’s arguing that Marius is too irresponsible to succeed the family. Karel announced that he’s investigating the robbery and is determined to recover the sword. Considering that the sword has likely been in his possession all along, it’s doubtless that he’ll succeed at his task.”

Once he was finished with his explanation, I spoke. “All right, let me recap: ‘How could you have let the heirloom be stolen? Why weren’t you guarding it more carefully? You’re not fit to be the heir. I’m going to find the sword and

prove once and for all that I'm the better candidate.' Does that sound like a fair summary of the situation?" My last question was full of sarcasm. "The whole thing stinks to high heaven. No one else finds the situation a little *too* convenient?"

"The circumstances reek, of course, but Karel and his retainers made sure that they were far away from the capital when the crime took place, so there's nothing linking him to the theft. Without concrete proof, it's all conjecture so far. Recovering the sword will be looked upon favorably. I suspect that the only reason Karel hasn't come forward with the sword already is because it'll look fishy if he finds it too quickly."

Rabble-rousers and demagogues could stand to learn a thing or two from Karel and his one-man charade.

"That's where you come into play. Marius plans to declare that the sword Karel finds is a fake."

"Oookay. So in other words..."

I don't like where this is going... Camilo can't be suggesting what I think he is.

But as it turned out, Camilo *could* and *was*.

"Precisely. You're going to forge the Eimoor family's new heirloom sword by tomorrow."

"W-Wait a minute. When you say 'new heirloom sword,' you mean that my sword is going to replace their original heirloom?" I asked incredulously.

"You got it. The stolen sword is the 'fake,' so obviously, the sword in Marius's possession—the one you will be forging—must be the 'true' family heirloom."

"I'm not sure how to feel about one of my swords being used for deceit."

"The original sword may be an heirloom, but it's not as though it's a national treasure. It's not a gift from the gods or made by elves. It was originally forged by human hands, so is it really so different if you make one to replace it?"

"When you put it like that..."

"Focus on the fact that you'll be helping Marius," Camilo said.

“I don’t know...”

I was still hesitant, but I couldn’t deny that Camilo had a point. When all was said and done, the family heirloom was nothing more than a really good sword. If I made a sword that surpassed the original, no one would question it. I could hear the commentary now. “A sword *this* superb is worth being passed down from generation to generation. Truly a treasure.” The prospect of such easy acceptance was a point in favor of taking on the job.

If I’d been asked to make a national treasure, or even just a sword for a family ranked higher than the Eimoors, I would likely need to exceed the limits of steel as a metal; I’d have to use rare materials or employ sublime techniques. However, a sword for a comital family *could* be made from high-quality steel.

It also won’t hurt to ask Marius what his family’s sword is made of...

Camilo interrupted my train of thought. “Helen showed me the swords that she commissioned from you. The quality was obvious with a single glance, even for someone like me. If you could make a sword on that same level, it would be plenty sufficient to be considered the Eimoor family heirloom.”

Aaah, those are the only custom model swords I’ve released into the world. If he’s seen them and says they’re good enough, then I should trust his judgment.

I wasn’t perfectly at peace with my decision, but I’d come this far, so I might as well see everything through.

“I’ll do it, but I have a couple of conditions,” I said. “For example, I’d prefer not to use any metal better than steel because the resulting sword might end up being too dangerous. Of course, I’ll still guarantee the quality of the final product.”

“That’s fine.” Camilo agreed without thinking twice, but then suddenly changed the subject. “Sorry, but do you see the chest over there? Can you hide yourself inside it?”

“This one?” I gestured to a chest in the back. It was certainly large, but it didn’t look big enough for me to cram into.

Camilo glanced back at me and said, “That’s the one.”

I did as I was told and lifted the lid, peeking inside. It was deeper than it looked.

Actually, it was clearly deeper than physically possible.

The chest was cleverly constructed—it was able to contain more goods than anyone inspecting it would imagine, and there was definitely enough room for a person. I clambered inside and shut the lid on top of myself.

###

I lost track of how long I sat inside the chest, but it was long enough that I was able to take a brief nap. We must've already traveled a long way from the forest; the roads here were well maintained and so the horses traveled much faster than a person's walking pace. However, our journey wasn't yet over. I had no choice but to submit myself to the rocking of the cart.

An indeterminate amount of time later, the wagon finally jolted to a stop. It sounded boisterous outside, so I deduced that we'd arrived at the entrance to the capital city.

"Next!" I could hear commands being shouted from multiple directions. It felt like I was back on Earth, standing in line at the immigration counter and waiting to enter a different country.

But really, I couldn't be sure of our location. After all, I was stuck inside the chest.

Our cart moved forward in fits and spurts. The voices of the guards grew closer and closer. Finally, it seemed to be our turn.

"You're a peddler?" I heard the guard ask Camilo.

"Yes. I have a variety of wares today," Camilo responded.

"I have to inspect your goods."

"Please, be my guest."

Two sets of footsteps approached the luggage cart. Approached me. From the heavy treads, I assumed they were both guards. They climbed into the cart, and I heard them open the lid on the chest opposite the one where I was hiding. They worked their way around the cart, opening one chest after another.

I crouched in the dark, waiting and fearing the moment that they would discover me. My skin was cold and clammy from sweat. They came closer and closer still. And then...they left, stepping down from the cart without checking my chest.

I heard one of the guards say to Camilo, "All right, you're good to go. Pass on through."

"Thank you very much," he replied politely.

The cart jolted forward again.

Once through the gates, we were immediately swallowed into the hustle and bustle of the city. The motion of the cart and the sound of its wheels against the ground changed. However, I still hadn't gotten the okay from Camilo to leave the chest, so I didn't deem it safe for me to emerge. I had to be careful to not make any noise.

After entering the city, we took a long route that wound around things I couldn't see and sloped up and over hills. Occasionally, we made brief stops. A short while after one such pause, the cart halted, and this stop somehow had a feeling of finality.

We had arrived.

"You can come out now!" Camilo called.

I opened the lid and wobbled my way out of the chest. With every little movement, my body screamed, "Finally! About time..." Standing on the cargo platform, I stretched from head to toe, my spine and hips popping.

"That was rough," I said, though, in truth, that was an understatement. If I'd been the age I used to be when I'd died, my hips would've been in such pain that standing would've been impossible.

"You have my sympathy and my apologies. I couldn't have anyone finding out you were hiding in there."

"I suppose I have to forgive you," I replied with a wry smile. "So, where are we now?"

"We're at the Eimoor family forge. The weapons used by their private soldiers

are made and repaired here.”

“It sure is quiet,” I remarked. I would’ve expected to hear the clanging and banging of a water-powered trip hammer in a place like this.

“Marius put a pause on all work and sent everyone away except for his most trusted craftsmen,” Camilo explained.

“Good idea.”

Of course, he wouldn’t want a crowd here to witness me forge the “true” family heirloom.

I hopped off the back of the cart with a grunt and glanced around at our surroundings. It looked like we were in a delivery area inside the forge. There was no furnace in sight.

Outside, the sun had completed most of its journey through the sky, even though we’d set off so early in the morning. I hadn’t realized it’d gotten so late. My conception of the passage of time from inside the chest had been fuzzy. The trip had really been a long one, even by horse.

“I’ll start preparing what I need,” I said, quickly switching into business mode.

“I sent someone to tell Marius that we’ve arrived, so he should be coming around shortly.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. Camilo gestured toward a door that presumably led farther into the forge. I walked over to it and swung it open.

Time to get started on repaying the favor of a lifetime.

The forge proper was on the other side of the door. It was fully stocked, complete with a furnace, bellows, hammers, and a smattering of other equipment. My eye was immediately drawn toward a giant hammer. When I looked closer, I realized that it was connected at the top to a water wheel outside. It was a trip hammer! If I wanted to try using it, the installed data could tell me how.

The firebed in the furnace wasn’t magical, so I had to build the fire by hand. First, I spread out a layer of charcoal and then collected the supplies I would

need: bark and straw for kindling, plate metal, and a hammer.

I set the metal on an anvil and began to hammer the end of it with my full strength, flipping it over several times. In doing so, I slowly raised the temperature of the metal, and before long, it was glowing red with heat.

I covered the bark with straw and brought the hot metal into contact with the straw to light it on fire. I rushed to bring the smoldering straw over to the firebed and then placed it near the charcoal. Using the bellows, I encouraged the fire to spread onto the charcoal bed.

The charcoal soon caught fire. I fanned the flames with the bellows and fed it with more charcoal. Had I been in my own forge, this process would've been completed in a snap. All I would've had to do was provide the fuel. Then, with a small spark of magic, the fire and wind would've taken on lives of their own.

I'm sure that someone with more magical ability would be able to light a fire just as easily in this furnace, but I was only given the bare minimum magical ability with my reincarnation. I'd agreed to it at the time, so there was no point playing "what if" now. Besides, a powerful sorcerer was unlikely to choose a life as a blacksmith.

Once the fire was burning bright and hot, I picked out another plate of metal, the highest quality of the lot, and stuck it into the fire. Once it was glowing with heat, I transferred it to the anvil and began to hammer it out. I focused on making sure that the internal composition of the metal was uniform throughout.

Why does this feel different than usual? Is it because I'm using a different hammer? I should've brought mine from my workshop after all.

I put the question out of my mind and refocused on the work at hand. I was making a custom model sword, so I couldn't let my mind wander. After the metal was the length of a longsword, I moved on to shaping—I had to reheat the metal and carefully hammer it into the correct shape.

In the end, the longsword had a lengthy, straight blade, simple but strong.

"You're almost done," Camilo said, appearing out of nowhere.

"With the shaping at least," I replied.

I thrust the sword back into the firebed to heat it up again and prepare it for quenching. Using the bellows, I nudged the temperature of the sword higher and higher until I judged it to be perfect, at which point I swiftly withdrew it from the flames and plunged it into ice-cold water.

After the blade had cooled and hardened to a sufficient degree, I held it aloft above the firebed, allowing the flames to gently lick along the sword. My goal was to warm the metal only slightly before letting it cool completely. Finally, I ground the blade's edges until they were razor sharp and then polished the entire length of the sword.

Just like that, my work was complete.

Or...not?

"Something feels off," I said out loud, feeling troubled.

"What's wrong?" Camilo asked with concern. "Aren't you done?"

"Well...I am, but the finish of the sword isn't quite right."

I got it! It's missing the luster that my custom blades usually have. At best, this sword is only an elite model, albeit on the higher end of the spectrum.

It was impressive that I could make such a high-quality product in the short time that I had (thank you, cheats), but considering that I'd been aiming for a sword that was good enough to supersede a family treasure, I was a little disappointed at the outcome.

"As far as I can tell, the craftsmanship is superb," Camilo stated.

"No, this isn't good enough."

Just like my own workshop, Marius's forge had a stock of firewood. I took one log and set a bundle of straw on top of it. Holding the longsword I'd just forged, I took up a stance in front of the log, raised the blade, and slashed through the straw bundle in one go. The straw fell apart with a gentle rustle, and the sword itself bit deep into the wood.

Camilo was astonished. "What are you talking about? The sword is beautifully sharp."

"But it could be sharper," I rebutted.

I knew better than anyone else how sharp my custom blades could be. This sword was only an elite model.

To demonstrate, I took out my own knife and repeated the same experiment with the straw and log. That knife sliced clean through both.

That's what should've happened if the longsword was a proper custom model.

"W-What just happened?" Camilo stuttered, astonished by the demonstration.

"See? When I go all out, this is the quality I expect my blades to be."

"I-Is that so?" He drew back unconsciously.

Helen must've only shown him what the swords looked like, not what they could do.

"I ask you not to tell anyone else," I said.

"Sure," Camilo replied. "No one would believe me anyway."

"Yes, there is that."

The straw was one thing, but the log would be a hard sell...

"I'll try forging a few more," I said.

"What are you going to do with this one?"

"If you want it, you can have it," I told him. "I'll even give you a discount."

Camilo grinned. "As enterprising as always, Master Blacksmith."

After our exchange, I experimented by making two more knives. Neither of them surpassed elite model quality. The metal didn't shine the way I wanted it to.

Elite models did have a sheen to them, but it was nothing compared to the luster of a custom model.

Am I overthinking this? I swear the ones I've made before glowed in comparison. How do I make the raw metal from Marius's stores shine the way mine does?

Out of the blue, the realization struck me like a bolt of lightning. "I'm asking

the wrong questions!”

If I can't pull out custom model quality from the materials I have on hand, then all I have to do is make better materials!

I built the heat back up in the firebed and dismantled my personal custom model knife. I then stuck the naked metal of the blade into the fire until it glowed red hot. From there, I removed the knife from the heat and cut it into three pieces. I sandwiched these pieces in between alternating layers of Marius's plate metal, wrapped the whole thing in wet hemp cloth, piled some ashes from the burning straw on top of the bundle, and finally, stuck the whole thing into the firebed.

Once heated through, I pulled the glowing lump of metal from the fire and hammered it out, working to blend the material from my former knife with the new plate metal. Once again, my cheats proved to be indispensable.

Heat it up, hammer it out. Heat it up, hammer it out. After repeating these two steps over and over again, I moved on to elongating the metal. However, I wouldn't be hammering it out to longsword-length just yet.

I elongated it to an intermediate size. Then, I scored the middle of the metal down its length and folded the two halves together before hammering again. All in all, I folded the metal fifteen times. This folding technique was a traditional swordsmithing technique in Japan, and the repeated overlapping of the metal would help blend my disassembled knife's steel evenly with the plate steel.

I reheated the mixed-metal bundle one last time before I tried to elongate it to the length of a longsword blade. Simultaneously, I hammered the metal carefully, aiming to remove any remaining imperfections. The steel sang under my machinations, and I felt none of the unease I'd experienced with the previous sword.

Once the metal was the right length and perfectly even, I started shaping. This work too was a cycle of heating and hammering, but I had to focus and prevent reintroducing any warpage to the metal.

The blade took on a different shape from the first one I had made—rather than being rigid and straight, this sword's edge curved gracefully.

I hadn't thought about it before, but I would have to adorn the sword later. A family heirloom should be splendid and ornate.

Quenching, tempering, polishing, and grinding. I ran through the final steps to complete the longsword. Once finished, I took a long, hard look at the final blade. It gleamed exactly the way that custom models were supposed to.

I set up the log and straw test once more and swung the longsword casually down onto the straw. The blade cut straight down to the floor, slicing through the straw and log like butter; the halves split apart and everything collapsed.

I was now done with the body of the sword, and it would certainly hold its own in a clash against another sword. However, plain as it was, it was still far from deserving the status of an heirloom.

I borrowed a chisel (of course, everything else I'd used had also been borrowed). My cheats helped me to preserve the balance of the sword and the strength of the metal as I carved a design into the blade. I followed the curve of the blade and etched a delicate pattern of vines, stems, and leaves. At the very tip of the blade, I added a flower in full bloom. Thanks to my cheat abilities, the work proceeded smoothly, even though I hadn't even made a draft of the design. However, it took quite a while to carve the pattern into both sides of the sword.

Well, there's no use rushing it. If I don't do this properly now, it'll ruin all the work I've put in so far. It's going to be the treasured heirloom of a noble family, after all, so it deserves the royal treatment.

At last, the blade was finished.

Next came the cross guard and pommel. I decorated the guard with a plant motif as well; I wanted the design to appear three-dimensional, and the vines and leaves twining across the surface of the metal seemed to come alive beneath my chisel. In the center of the guard, I added the crest of the Eimoor family, and on the pommel, I carved a delicate flower bud.

I couldn't forget my insignia: the fat cat sitting on its haunches. This time I carved a smaller version of it into the hilt, where it would be hidden once I

wrapped the hilt with leather. It was my own little Easter egg!

I went over the length of the sword one more time with a rasp, smoothing over any sharp bits and burrs that'd been left over from the carving. The design now stood out in vivid relief.

Once that was completed, I decided to stop for the night. It had grown late before I realized it, and a powerful drowsiness was tugging on my consciousness. Sleepy as I was, it would be meaningless to continue working. I knew that this was par for the course when growing older though, so there was no use resisting.

After extinguishing the fire, I found some blankets in the forge, wrapped myself up in them, and went to sleep right there on the floor.

###

"—ke up. Wake up already."

My body was being rocked side to side. I groaned and peeled open my eyes.

Camilo was the one who had been shaking me. "I was worried that you'd fallen into a depression after not being able to forge the sword, but here you are, sleeping without a care in the world!"

"All-nighters are bad for your health," I drawled without getting up. Since I'd finished the sword yesterday, I had time to relax.

Then, a voice different from Camilo's but equally familiar chimed in. "One's health is an investment in and of itself."

I scrambled to my feet. "Marius!"

The man I'd come to know from our interactions at the entrance of the city was now standing before me, a wide grin splashed across his face. He had eschewed his battered leather armor for an elegant ensemble befitting a noble. However, I did recognize the shortsword strapped across his waist as one of my own making. I was tickled at the sight, if not a little embarrassed.

"I'm pleased to see you again, Eizo," Marius greeted me courteously. Despite his smile, a cloud seemed to loom across his face, anxiety from his family's crisis painted across his features.

Huh? Wait a second.

I found myself responding more formally than usual. "I hadn't realized you knew my name, Marius."

"I asked for it when I knew I wanted to request you for this favor. It would be discourteous of me to embroil someone in my family's circumstances without even knowing his name."

"Understood," I said. "But you don't have to speak to me so formally, Marius. Please, act like you always have, as if this were just another meeting in the city." His newfound politeness made me uncomfortable, and our conversation felt more stilted than usual.

"I cannot. You are the Eimoor family's salvation."

Why do you always have to be so exacting, Marius? Let's overlook the trivial details, shall we?

"Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary. I've been on the receiving end of a few favors from you as well."

Marius grinned. "All right then, as an acknowledgment of both our positions, why don't we both dispense with the formalities," he suggested.

Tit for tat. Either I agree here or we end up speaking circles around each other until the end of eternity.

"I agree with your proposal... I mean, yeah, I'd be happy to."

Thus was born the legend of the blacksmith who can speak casually with the (likely) next head of the Eimoor countship.

"If you've got the time, will you wait while I wrap the hilt of the sword with leather?" I asked.

"Sure, I have some free time," Marius responded.

I nodded and got to work. In hardly any time at all (thanks again to my cheats), I had the grip wrapped up snug and tight.

"All right. I'm done. Give it a try."

"Okay then, give it here." I passed him the sword, and he inspected it

carefully. “It’s splendid,” he said, voice tinged with admiration.

He seemed mesmerized and did nothing but look for several long minutes. Then, snapping back to the present, he got into position and began to flow through a fighting sequence. His swordsmanship was sharp and clean, and I could see Diana’s form in his. They most likely learned the same school of swordsmanship. However, where Diana’s style emphasized speed—perhaps because she was a woman—Marius’s emphasized power, full of explosive thrusts and brutal swings.

Once he was satisfied, he came to a stop.

“How does it feel?” I asked him.

“Superb. Absolutely brilliant. It’s better than any sword I’ve wielded up until now,” Marius gushed. I could sense the heart and sincerity behind his words.

“I made this sword with nearly all of my abilities, so I have faith that it won’t lose out to your run-of-the-mill family treasure.”

Whoops, I almost forgot. There’s one important question I needed to ask Marius.

“By the way, what material was the original heirloom sword made of?”

The sword I’d made was, without a doubt, outstanding, but it was still made of steel. It wouldn’t stand a chance against even a subpar sword made of metals imbued with magic, such as orichalcum or adamantite.

“The ‘fake’ sword in my brother’s possession was bequeathed to the Eimoor family when we became a countship. The king commissioned the sword from the most skilled blacksmith in the country at the time. He had requested that the sword be made of a godly metal, but alas, it was not to be for a mere human to interfere with the divine.”

“So...it was made of normal steel,” I summarized.

“Precisely.”

Phew. That’s one hurdle cleared. It was impossible for a normal human to handle orichalcum, after all. But I’m not normal, so...

“One more thing. Have you shown the heirloom to people in the past?”

“It’s been brought out before during important family ceremonies, but otherwise, it’s forbidden to remove it from the premises. Even in the records, it’s only referred to as a sword bequeathed by the king to the count.”

“Then it’s unlikely that a third party would notice a discrepancy between the appearance of this sword and the original one. Shouldn’t cause too much commotion, right?”

“That’s right,” Marius affirmed.

Looks like our plan is still sound.

I’d been worried that the “true” heirloom sword had been on display at a place similar to a natural history museum back on Earth, but it seemed like that sword had been treated as a ceremonial object and not often shown to the public.

“Worst comes to worst, a direct comparison of the two swords will settle the question of which one is the ‘true’ heirloom. That is, as long as our sword doesn’t lose to the ‘fake’ sword,” Marius said with a confident grin.

“Now that everything’s settled, I still have to make the scabbard,” I said.

“Too right. A sword must have a scabbard,” Camilo replied.

If this had been a normal longsword, I could’ve slapped a scabbard together without a second thought, but this time, I had to make a scabbard worthy of a family treasure.

“I don’t know how long you intend to pass this sword off as your family’s heirloom, but it certainly isn’t suitable to present a naked blade.”

“Can you finish it by tomorrow?” Marius asked.

“If I give it my all, I can finish tonight.”

“You don’t have to make anything over-the-top. The ‘fake’ sword’s scabbard isn’t anything extra extravagant,” explained Marius.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Thanks, I’m counting on you.” With those last words, Marius and Camilo both left the forge. The next time I saw them, I’d deliver the completed

commission.

Let's get this show back on the road.

The foundation of the scabbard would be wood, I decided. I selected a well-worn plank of wood from the stock, my cheats helping guide my judgment. The age of the wood wouldn't match up with the supposed age of the sword, but we could say that the scabbard had to be remade recently. That excuse wouldn't work half as well if I was dealing with a national treasure or a divine weapon.

To start, I placed the sword on top of the wood so that I could gauge the dimensions. I prepared two planks of wood and carved the shape of the sword into each. Then, I glued the two halves together to form the hollow where the sword would rest.

For the next couple of steps, I used one of the test knives I'd made the previous day. First, I carved out the outer surface of the scabbard. For decoration, I chiseled a single vine with sprouting leaves running down the middle of the wood. I then tidied up the woodwork, using the knife as a substitute for a wood plane.

Next, I applied a layer of beeswax, a rather lavish material, over the entire scabbard with a piece of cloth. It wouldn't do to skimp over what was meant to be a family treasure. Rubbing in the beeswax took some time, but I didn't rush.

With the woodwork complete, I moved on to the metalwork.

I lit the forge and heated a small plate of metal, which I hammered out into a long and thin strip. Then, I wrapped the resulting strip of steel around the opening of the scabbard. This could've been a long process, filled with the trial and error of me figuring out the exact shape and length that the metal needed to be. However, thanks to the cheats, I got it correct in one try. After mounting the metal strip, I used a chisel to engrave the steel with the same leaf motif.

The sun was setting by the time I'd finished. I had been working on the scabbard for nearly the entire day; Camilo had woken me up early in the morning and he and Marius hadn't stayed to chat for very long. Of course, if I hadn't possessed the benefit of my cheats, the work might've taken me a whole

month. Who knows? Scabbards seemed simple to make, but just like anything else, they required time and effort.

I slid the sword into the scabbard experimentally. It turned out quite well, if I do say so myself. The final product was just the right amount of ornate and sophisticated, and it certainly wouldn't lose out to the sword in Karel's possession, the "fake."

I chuckled to myself with delight. Just as I was patting myself on the back, Camilo and Marius returned.

"How's it going? No way you're going to say you need more time, right?" Camilo joked.

He doesn't seem even remotely concerned that I might not have finished. I was both pleased and somewhat self-conscious of the faith he had in me.

"Actually, I finished right before you arrived." I presented the finished sword to the two of them. "What do you think?"

Marius whistled in admiration. "The 'fake' won't hold a candle to this one." He was beaming with pleasure.

"Good. I'm glad," I replied a little curtly. I was happy to hear my work praised, but mixed in with my happiness was a hefty dose of embarrassment as well.

"Thank you so much, Eizo."

"Don't mention it. I'm just paying back the favor."

Marius extended his right hand toward me. I gripped it and shook it firmly.

"It's time for you to get some rest," Camilo cut in. "I'll come pick you up again tomorrow."

"Thanks," I said.

There was a part of me that wanted to slip away in the middle of the night and go home, but the outer gates were probably shut for the evening anyway. We would also be less likely to raise any suspicions tomorrow since we would be mixed in with the crowd.

And so, I decided to follow Camilo's suggestion and turn in for the night.

I woke up the next morning well before Camilo came to collect me. There was a jug full of water in the building, and I used it to wash my face before packing up what little I'd brought in preparation for our journey home. The one thing I made sure to bring along was one of the failed experimental knives. It would serve as a replacement for my self-defense knife that I'd sacrificed and would make due until I had a chance to forge another custom model knife back in my own workshop.

Camilo and Marius didn't come until the sun was high in the sky, and when they arrived, they weren't alone. Several women trailed after them.

What's going on?

Camilo was all smiles. "Morning. Sleep well?"

"Y-Yeeeah," I said, confused. "I got up bright and early."

Sleeping in, let's say, less-than-ideal conditions was a superpower I'd picked up from my previous life. Back then, I had to frequently sleep sitting up, so I wasn't particular about where I dozed off anymore.

"I don't mean to rush you, but can you change into these?" Marius gestured to a set of extravagant clothing that the women were laying out.

My confusion grew twofold. "Say again?"

What's the point of changing into such a fancy outfit right before I go home?

Leaving me to stew in my bewilderment, Marius turned to the women. "He's not accustomed to this type of clothing. Help him get dressed," he ordered.

The women nodded and moved to surround me.

"H-H-Hold on a minute!" My voice rose in proportion to my panic. "Why do I have to change?!"

The women were unfazed by my outburst. They were focused on carrying out their orders to...strip me naked.

I pushed at the clothing they were shoving toward me, trying to buy time so I could get an answer from Marius or Camilo. The two of them were no help

whatsoever and merely returned my plea for help with devious grins.

Not wanting to damage the clothing by clutching the fabric too tightly, I briefly eased up on my hold. But the women recognized an opening when they saw one and jumped at the opportunity. In a flash, they'd divested me of all my clothing, leaving me buck naked but for my underpants.

Now I have no choice but to let them dress me. I can't deny that I wouldn't know how to put on formal attire...

I gave up resisting and waited patiently as they slipped the garments onto me. In reward for my obedience, they had me clothed again in short order.

The outfit's design resembled the one that Marius was wearing—suitable for nobility. Camilo's ensemble was also more luxurious than his usual clothing, though I had been too caught up to notice earlier.

"Now will you explain? What's the point of making me change?" I grumbled. "You're not taking me home today after all, are you?"

The three of us were now in a carriage and making our way to an undisclosed destination. I was sitting stiffly in fancy new clothes that I had (been forcibly) changed into.

Marius didn't bother hiding his amusement at my discomfort. "You'll be accompanying us for the final showdown between my elder brother and myself."

My face refused to unwrinkle and I feared that my displeased expression was now permanent. The one saving grace was that Samya and Rike weren't here to see me. They'd never let me live it down...

Camilo took over with his talent for sweet talking. "Easy, no need to look so angry. Don't you want to see the 'fake' sword for yourself?"

"I don't *not* want to see it..." I was forced to admit.

After all, this was a treasure bequeathed to the Eimoors by His Majesty the King himself. Was it any surprise that I was interested? The sword was sure to be exquisite.

“Because of me, both of you are already involved, and I hope you’ll stand by me to the end. I know it’s selfish, but please, grant me this one request,” Marius said.

I honestly had no reason to refuse. However, there was one point I was unwilling to concede until I got a satisfactory answer. “Just riddle me this—why did I have to change?”

“If you’ll allow me to be blunt, it is unthinkable that a mere blacksmith should be allowed to attend today’s meeting,” Marius answered. “I don’t personally agree with such classist thinking, but it is not up to me. That’s why I had you change.”

He kept speaking, expanding on his explanation. “Eizo, you’ll be attending as my guest visiting from the north. Karel won’t be coming alone either, so there’s no problem with me bringing a guest or two. In fact, Karel *wants* third-party witnesses to be present when he announces that he’s recovered the family heirloom. For that reason, Camilo is allowed to attend as well; Karel will want to take advantage of the traveling merchant’s information network to spread the news of his triumph. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have permitted a ‘lowly peddler’ to attend either.”

“I get it now.”

“Lowly peddler” was clearly Karel’s phrasing. For a noble who was next in line to succeed a countship, Marius was quite progressive.

His perspective must’ve been influenced by his job as a city guard where he encountered people from all walks of life.

After listening to Marius’s explanation, I could also understand the thinking behind allowing a merchant in but not a blacksmith. Like he’d said, it was down to the dissemination of information.

“Well, all of those carefully laid plans are going to backfire on him,” I commented.

“You got it. That’s the idea.”

I, a third-party “noble,” and Camilo, a proxy for the merchant’s network, would indeed bear witness to the events of today, but the news we’d be

spreading was of Karel's downfall. Karel's allies would also end up as the bearers of bad news, contrary to what Karel was planning. I hoped, without any real expectation, that he would accept his defeat with grace.

The carriage soon brought us to a grand estate.

Is this the main residence of the Eimoor family?

Marius answered my unspoken question. "This is the secondary estate of Lord Menzel."

The name wasn't familiar, but luckily, Camilo solved that problem for me. "Lord Menzel is a margrave," he said. In other words, he was one rank higher than a count.

"Quite an impressive place we've ended up in," I said.

"Lord Menzel is younger than my father was, but they were close friends," Marius explained. "Because of their relationship, we've requested that he arbitrate this matter."

I see. A margrave would also have a direct line to the king.

We disembarked from the carriage. A courteous young man—a servant, perhaps—led us to a spacious room in the manor. The three of us were the first to arrive.

Marius took a seat, and Camilo and I sat ourselves next to him. I didn't know anything about the rules of etiquette in this world, but it seemed that the customary sitting order was the same as it had been in Japan.

Marius kept the "true" heirloom sword at his side, tightly wrapped in cloth.

After a short while, three men entered the room. One of the newcomers shared similar features with Marius and was grinning broadly, broadcasting confidence.

My bet's on him being Karel.

If I hadn't heard anything about him, I wouldn't have suspected he'd be capable of treachery. On the contrary, he gave off the impression of a bright young man. Perhaps he had been once.

It's a shame that he's been blinded by greed.

Karel's two companions both looked important and wealthy. The three of them sat down across from us.

I had been chatting with Marius and Camilo before they came in, but we cut off conversation the moment they walked through the door. The six of us sat in silence and waited until the last (and most consequential) person arrived. He was a man clothed in an elaborate ensemble who looked to be in the prime of his life. His body was solidly built, and he sported neatly cropped hair and a mustache.

And that must be Lord Menzel.

We all rose to our feet. The margrave seated himself at the place of honor and gestured for us to sit.

The margrave turned first toward Karel's side of the room. "Am I correct to say that we are here today because Master Karel has recovered the stolen Eimoor family's heirloom sword?" His voice, deep and resounding, perfectly matched his image. If he were to raise his voice in anger, no doubt he would leave his opponent trembling.

Karel answered in a loud but clear voice. "Yes, I managed to recover the sword yesterday from a band of thieves near the country's border." He took out a long, cloth-wrapped package, and inside was presumably the fabled sword.

When the blade was revealed, I saw that the scabbard was simple and unadorned, just as Marius had said. The grip and cross guard were similarly humble in design, but it was still clear that the sword had been forged by a blacksmith of skill.

"And for what purpose have you requested my presence today?" the margrave inquired of Karel. "The missing sword has been recovered. There can be no better outcome. All that is left is for Master Marius to take up the title of Count Eimoor, no? Has the incident not been resolved to a satisfactory conclusion?" I couldn't tell whether his curt tone was because he didn't have a good impression of Karel or because that was just his personality.

Karel spared a brief glance at Marius before rebutting the margrave's words.

“To be frank, Your Grace, it has not. My brother did not lift a finger when our family’s heirloom was robbed from us. He does not deserve to succeed the countship.”

Let the games begin.

The margrave considered Karel’s argument, which was not without sense. The family treasure, a sword of immeasurable value, had been stolen. The person who was to head a high-ranking noble family could not be the kind of person who panics and does nothing.

With rank and title came a host of responsibilities. In particular, the count would be responsible for the livelihoods of all the people who lived in his countship and, as such, must be able to handle any difficult situations that arose. This time around, Marius hadn’t lived up to the task.

Of course, that was only supposing the heirloom had *actually* been stolen, but this wasn’t the case.

Nevertheless, there was no concrete proof that the theft was a farce. I suspected that Karel had already disposed of the bandits he’d hired. If so, it wouldn’t be a lie to say that Karel *had* located the lair of the bandits who’d stolen the sword, dealt with them swiftly, and retrieved the family’s heirloom. On the surface, everything lined up.

However, we had an ace up our sleeve. Our plan was not without its risks, but Karel was in for a surprise.

Marius opened his mouth to speak. “May I interject?”

“You may. Go ahead,” the margrave said.

“It may have appeared that I was dragging my feet, but such was not the case—in truth, the stolen sword is a fake. The true heirloom has been in my possession all along, and knowing that, I thought it sufficient to pursue the bandits at our own pace. I see now that my actions have raised doubts as to whether or not I cared enough to act at all, and I am reflecting on my choices. However, I hope you will grant that my hesitation concerned the pace of the investigation, not my capability to perform it. It was only a matter of time before I settled the incident.”

The margrave merely lifted one eyebrow. "Go on."

"I have the true heirloom with me here today." Marius brought out the cloth-wrapped sword and slowly undid its bindings, revealing the "true" sword, made by me, in its scabbard.

There was a loud clatter. I turned toward the other side of the room to see that Karel had risen to his feet in a fit of passion.

"Master Karel, calm yourself," the margrave rebuked.



Karel reluctantly took a seat. I glanced at his two companions, one of which wore a look of astonishment while the other looked pained. The former likely hadn't been told the full story. The latter...well, he should work on his poker face. I could tell he was a noble by his luxurious clothes, so he should know better than to wear his heart on his sleeve. He would end up dead someday if he continued his foray into scheming and intrigue, but his weakness was currently a boon for us.

The margrave pressed Marius for further details. "What do you mean by 'true' heirloom?"

"Yes, my lord, let me elaborate. Our father left a document, which explained everything. The sword presented for ceremonial use is not the 'true' heirloom of the Eimoor family. A fake one is usually brought out instead. According to the document, the real heirloom is only intended to be used in times of true calamity. If ever the country finds itself in a crisis, the head of the family will bring the sword into battle."

Marius withdrew from his pocket a piece of paper—it looked like it could be vellum—and handed it to the margrave.

He scanned its contents. "This is indeed Count Eimoor's handwriting," the margrave mused.

Karel sat wide-eyed.

What did you expect? There's no way Marius would whip out a sloppy forgery in a situation like this.

The person who'd forged the document must be skilled if they were able to fool the eyes of a longtime friend. I suspected that Camilo was the one who'd orchestrated this part of the plan. I peeked over at Camilo, and he shot me a quick wink.

A geezer has no business winking at another geezer!

Karel looked like he had something to say, but Marius was quicker to the punch. "By the time I'd discovered this document, my elder brother had already departed on his quest. I haven't been able to arrange an audience with him until today. It is my sincere regret that I was unable to pass the information to

him before this.” Marius bowed his head in a show of contrition.

Karel had been slowly rising in his seat, but he sat back down again. He must’ve been suspicious, but there were no obvious holes in Marius’s story.

“Well, Master Karel? Have you any complaints? Otherwise, I shall report today’s proceedings as is to His Majesty.” Whether intentional or not, the margrave’s proclamation must’ve seemed like a death sentence to Karel.

It might not have been the outcome he’d desired, but as it was, Karel could now make off scot-free. Swept away by his youthful ardor, he had single-mindedly gone off in pursuit. A commendable proactive attitude. He may not inherit the family title, but as far as I could tell, this was the best outcome he could hope for. He would even have a chance to run and hide away before Marius further investigated the cause behind their father’s and eldest brother’s deaths.

But Karel was not content to let the matter lie. “I cannot easily swallow this...this tale that the sword in my possession is a fake while my brother’s is true.”

By arguing the point, he’d sealed his fate. It was as if he’d moved his king piece in front of Marius’s pawn.

Marius was unfazed. “I understand. Let me prove it to you then.” I knew his blasé attitude was a sign of his unshakable faith in me, but I wished he’d cut me some slack.

“What are you proposing?” the margrave asked.

“It would be fastest to test the swords directly. May we borrow your garden?”

“Of course. Master Karel, do you assent?”

“I do,” Karel said.

Everyone stood to move outside. Karel was no longer bothering to hide his animosity and was now openly glaring at Marius. On the other hand, Marius conducted himself with grace and remained calm and collected.

The test was to be conducted in the courtyard. Both parties brought their respective “heirloom” with them, but there would be no duel.

Once in the courtyard, the sword I'd made was planted in the soil. Sticking out of the ground like it was, I couldn't help thinking that someone was going to declare, "Anyone who draws this sword out from the earth will be crowned king!" It was a ridiculous thought because, after all, I'd made the sword with my own hands.

A young soldier in the margrave's private employ approached the sword with a spear in hand. He would test the make of the sword by thrusting the spear at the naked blade. If the sword was damaged, it would be deemed a fake.

I could tell with just a glance that the spearhead wouldn't be able to scratch my sword with one, ten, or even fifty thrusts. Although my blade was only made of steel, it certainly wouldn't lose to a spear of *that* quality.

And just as I had anticipated...

The soldier thrust sharply at the sword I'd made. He continued striking until the spearhead gave out, about twenty times total. Just as I'd expected, the "true" sword's surface remained pristine.

"Impossible..." Karel muttered under his breath, disbelieving.

He wasn't wrong. It was impossible for Marius to have commissioned a sword of such high caliber in the span of a mere two days. That was, of course, if he'd asked a *normal* blacksmith.

The margrave was equally astounded and paid the sword the highest of compliments. "A sword truly befitting the king's tastes. It's resplendent in both beauty and strength."

Marius saw his opening and quickly chimed in, "Exactly right, Your Grace. There can be no other sword worthy of being deemed the *true* family heirloom." He didn't fail to put a subtle emphasis on the word "true."

Well, my sword passed the test. Now what about the "fake"?

"Next is Master Karel's sword."

"Yes, Your Grace." Karel planted his sword in the earth.

"Bring out a new spear!" the margrave commanded.

However, Marius interjected before the guards could move. "There will be no

need for that.” He stepped forward and swung the “true” sword at Karel’s “fake” one. My sword sliced deep and soundlessly into Karel’s metal blade. Marius pulled the sword out from the body of its brethren, and the “fake” fell apart in two pieces. The upper half hit the ground with a *clang*, breaking the silence.

“Strength, durability, sharpness. My sword excels in all three. There can be no mistaking my blade’s superiority.” Marius proclaimed his victory with a smile, turning toward the margrave. “Is Your Grace satisfied with this conclusion?”

The margrave looked like he was still processing what had just happened, but he couldn’t very well deny the sight he’d witnessed with his own eyes. “Yes...I do suppose so. Any warrior who has the good fortune of wielding this sword in battle could single-handedly slay a thousand foes. There is no doubt in my mind that your sword is the true heirloom.”

The margrave’s astonishment didn’t prevent him from declaring a winner, and after a moment, he seemed to regain his footing. “The inheritance of the countship shall proceed as it is recorded. I shall report today’s events to His Majesty. Are we in agreement, Master Marius and Master Karel?”

With this, the issue is settled. I want to get out of these clothes and go home ASAP.

Alas, it wasn’t over just yet.

In an instant, Karel launched himself toward Marius with a scream. A knife gleamed in one of his hands. My cheat abilities allowed me to track his movements with ease, but I was too far away to jump into the fray. However, in that instant, I saw more movement out of the corner of my eye.

Marius leaped forward with shocking speed, wielding my sword in his right hand. Without a trace of hesitation, he sliced Karel open from the right shoulder to the opposite hip, cleaving and separating his brother’s torso from his legs. Karel’s upper half fell away from Marius and crashed to the ground with a dull thud.

Marius turned toward the margrave, sank down on one knee, and bowed his head in supplication. “Your Grace, you have my sincerest apologies for sullyng your garden. Please punish me for my transgression as you see fit.”

The problem of the garden was a simple one to fix; only the soil in the immediate area needed to be replaced. However, Marius was referring to more than the stains on the soil.

But despite the tragedy that had transpired, the margrave wasn't angry. In fact, he smiled. "Don't trouble yourself over it. You dispatched a traitor with expediency and skill, Lord Marius."

The margrave's use of "lord" instead of "master" was proof that he'd accepted Marius's claim to the countship; his condemnation of Karel as a traitor meant that he no longer considered Karel to be a member of the Eimoor family. In this private setting, the margrave had expressed his true feelings.

"You've witnessed a most embarrassing moment in our family history. You must let me repay you," Marius said with his head still bowed.

"I will remember you said that, Lord Marius," the margrave replied with a sharp nod. He then turned his attention to Karel's allies. "You two!"

"Y-Yes, Your Grace?" one stuttered out.

"H-How may I be of service?" said the other.

They both looked utterly lost. Unlike the three in our party, these two hadn't come into the situation knowing what was going to happen, and the cards had fallen well outside of their expectations.

"You will not tell a single soul what transpired here today. I need not tell you what will happen if you do, yes?" The margrave offered his threat in a lofty and menacing tone.

The two of them folded with no resistance—not that I'd expected any from them—and nodded furiously. They were practically shaking in fear, the poor things.

"Good."

The margrave called out for a servant to lead Karel's allies away. I was sure that those two were grateful to be dismissed. The rest of us left the courtyard and headed back to the room we'd started in. The servants would clean up the bloody aftermath.

As we exited the courtyard, Marius turned to look upon the body of his brother one last time. The glance was fleeting, but his eyes looked, to me, as if they were filled to the brim with sorrow.

We returned to the room where the margrave and Marius would presumably be discussing the path ahead. Camilo and I had no reason to stay, and the margrave was ready to dismiss us. However, Marius had a different idea.

“Your Grace, I beg your permission to allow these two men to stay. I am terribly sorry that I cannot tell you the full circumstances, but they have the right to see this affair to its end,” he insisted. The margrave agreed, and so Camilo and I remained.

The actual discussion had been too lengthy to record, but it could be summarized as follows: Marius would succeed the countship and take on the mantle of the Eimoor family within the week. There wouldn’t be a large, public ceremony, but there would be a private banquet. I’d let Diana know as soon as I returned home. I’d also have to remember to consult Marius and Camilo later.

Then, there was the matter of Karel. The plan was to sneak his corpse back to the Eimoor estate and bury him in the family graveyard. The story that would be leaked to the public was that Karel had left the country and was traveling the world to accumulate the knowledge and skills necessary to support Marius in the future. Furthermore, he would be keeping a low profile and hiding his identity in order to blend in and earn the trust of the townspeople. Other countries would be told that they shouldn’t look out for him or show him any special treatment; the usual hospitality shown to a member of a count’s family would not be necessary. They could also rest assured that Karel was not a spy.

It was up to each country’s discretion whether or not they believed the story. As far as the king was concerned, the time and effort they’d waste to verify the story was a benefit in and of itself. If I were to compare it to my job back on Earth, investigating the truth would be the equivalent of frittering away man-hours.

And so, the discussion brought this tumultuous chapter of the Eimoor family

to a close.

“I’m in your debt, Your Grace,” Marius said.

“And I, you,” the margrave responded.

They stood and shook hands, placing the final stamp on the deal.

I stood up to leave, trying to prevent the impatience I was feeling from showing on my face. But out of the blue, the margrave addressed me. “Lord Marius’s honored guest, tell me, have you previously studied the art of the sword?” His piercing gaze pinned me in place.

My heart was beating out of my chest, but I managed to say, “No, not to any real extent.”

I was just starting to relax now that the ordeal with Karel was over. Couldn’t he have asked me any other time?

“The one who reacted first to Karel’s movements was you, so I was positive that you had trained in swordsmanship.”

“I have picked up a few tricks with the sword here and there for self-defense, but I would hesitate to call it swordsmanship.”

The margrave’s eyes narrowed further and the weight of his gaze grew heavier still. “If you insist, I will not press further. For now. Should the opportunity arise in the future, I would like to spar with you.”

“I should not refuse, Your Grace, but please spare me. I could not live up to your expectations.” I bowed my head. My skin had broken out into a cold sweat.

Without another word, the margrave turned, chuckling to himself as he left the room.

“Amazing,” Marius said once we were alone. “You never fail to astound me, Eizo.” He had cast off the formal manner he’d adopted and was now speaking to me familiarly again.

I had no idea what he was talking about. “What do you mean?” *What was so amazing about being afraid?*

“His Grace the Margrave was applying a lot of pressure on you during that last exchange, but you answered all of his questions.”

“I suppose I did...?”

I thought that his countenance was rather intimidating, but it wasn't unbearable.

“Just getting out a single word answer would've been a feat for a normal person.”

“I could feel the pressure he was exerting from my seat beside you. No regular person would've been able to answer him,” Camilo added.

Is answering him really such an impressive feat?

“His Grace is renowned for his swordsmanship, and was once in charge of an expedition to bring down an ogre. He never left the front lines and was the first to charge into battle,” Marius said. “I suspect he was pressing you because he could sense your strength. Admittedly, his personality leaves something to be desired.”

“Is that so?”

“Don't worry. He's not a bad person by any means. He overlooked the guests that I sneaked in, after all.”

“That was benevolent.”

Is my future going to be filled with peculiar people?

I fervently wished Marius the best of luck from here on out.

###

The three of us left the margrave's estate and made for the Eimoor residence. With everything over and done with, all I wanted to do was change out of my fancy clothing.

Since I had been taken straight to the forge when I'd first come to the capital and we'd gone directly to the margrave's estate in the morning, this was going to be my first time visiting the Eimoor home. The estate itself was smaller than the margrave's had been, but the entrance gates were grand and imposing.

Upon arriving, Camilo and I were led to a lushly decorated, parlor-like room. Marius had disappeared elsewhere. I guessed he had gone to change.

I want to change too...

A middle-aged servant called over to me. “Master Eizo, can you come with me please?”

I followed him down a tapestry-lined corridor. Unlike the hallways in estates shown in the media from my previous world, there wasn’t a single suit of armor or vase in sight. The hallway to the parlor had been similarly sparse. We hadn’t gone very far when the servant opened a door leading to another room. “Please enter.”

I followed his instructions and stepped into the room. Several female servants were waiting inside. The door shut behind me, giving the situation a dramatic air, but I doubted anything of importance was going to happen. I had already spotted my clothing folded up and resting off to the side.

“We were told you are unfamiliar with your current clothing, so we are here to assist you with changing,” one of the servants said.

I’d learned this morning that the process took longer the more I resisted, so I gave myself over to their efforts. In a flash, the servants had divested me of the formal wear. To be honest, I appreciated the help—I couldn’t make heads or tails of the clothing. I hadn’t known how to put them on, and obviously, I didn’t know how to take them off properly either. I could dress myself in my original clothes without help, but there was little point in turning away their aid at this point.

Perhaps because I’d known what to expect from the beginning this time, the servants finished dressing me faster than I’d expected. I was now back to being “Villager A.”

Finally, I can relax again. Those fancy clothes didn’t suit me at all.

As I reveled in my newfound feeling of freedom, one of the servants chuckled.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“I was only thinking that you seem to be exceptionally pleased with your

current outfit, sire,” she said.

“Well, I’m just your average old man, the kind you can find everywhere in town. This outfit suits me better. Don’t I look good?” I joked.

“No doubt, sire,” she replied, her smile deepening.

Once I was finished changing, I returned to the parlor with the male servant who had guided me earlier. Camilo and Marius were sitting in the room, chatting and sipping tea.

“You’re back,” Marius greeted me.

“Yes. I didn’t realize how much tension I’d been holding in my shoulders until after I’d changed,” I responded with a laugh. “Now I know how utterly unfit I am to play the part of a noble. It doesn’t suit me at all.”

“You’re right about that. I can’t see myself bowing down to you no matter what attire you’re in.”

The three of us shared a laugh at that.

“I owe you both for your help with this incident. I cannot thank you enough.” Marius bowed his head.

“I said this at the beginning, but I’ll say it again—you helped me a lot in the city. I’m only repaying the favor,” I stated.

“I agree. I won’t speak for Eizo, but for me, it is extremely beneficial to be connected to a countship, if I may be so blunt,” admitted Camilo. “I didn’t do anything in particular today, so you don’t have to pay it any mind.”

“I’m grateful for your generosity,” Marius said with a tremulous smile.

It’s natural for him to be wary after today’s events. Camilo and I are now privy to very sensitive information about the Eimoor family. At least we’ve reassured Marius that neither of us plans to plot against him using the info.

“I may not be able to give you much in terms of remuneration, but you have my thanks from the bottom of my heart. If there is anything I can do for you, I will,” offered Marius.

Camilo kept his request modest. “I’m content as long as we continue to trade.

Ongoing business with a comital family is boon enough.” After all, he would gain prestige if he were to become a purveyor for a countship.

“Of course. Providing I do not offend the businesses my family already deals with, I am happy to do business with you,” Marius agreed. “And you, Eizo?”

“Me?”

Even if he asks, there’s nothing that jumps out as something I absolutely need to have. Well...I suppose not nothing.

“I would like any information you may have on ores and minerals,” I requested. “Rare ones, not iron ore.”

“Such as mithril?”

“Exactly.”

“Is the information alone sufficient? You don’t need me to procure the real thing?”

“Yes,” I replied, “just information on how I may be able to find it. I’ll have Camilo procure it for me.”

“All right, I’ll see what I can do,” said Marius. “Shall I relay any information I find directly to Camilo then?”

“Yes, that would be a big help.” I looked over at Camilo who gave me a nod. I hadn’t asked Camilo’s opinion beforehand, but he seemed to be on board, thankfully.

“I have prepared one other reward for each of you. Please accept it without saying anything.”

Marius handed the two of us each a small pouch. I opened it and took a peek inside. Nestled within were several gold coins.

“Wait, wait, wait... I can’t—” My words of refusal fizzled out when I saw Marius’s serious countenance. He held my gaze and shook his head subtly.

I guess I have no choice but to accept.

Finally, I gave in and simply stated, “I accept your generosity.”

“Good,” Marius said with a nod.

Our conversation had come to an end, so it was time for me to return home. Before leaving though, I had a question for Marius. “By the way, I should fetch Diana and accompany her back here, right? I’m assuming she should be here for the banquet.”

“Hmm? Oh...yes. The succession of the countship must be processed as soon as possible.”

What was that pause? Marius the Guard seemed to have taken him over for a second. Well, I suppose it's no big deal.

“In that case, I’ll arrange with Camilo to have her back here in two, maybe three days,” I proposed. “Will that work?”

“No problem on my end,” Camilo added.

“Thanks. I’ll leave it to the two of you then,” Marius said. “I’ll begin the preparations in accordance with that schedule.”

With that cleared up, it's time to go home.

I’d only been away for three days, but I missed it terribly. I tried to quash my impatience as we departed from the Eimoor estate and set out on the road back to the Black Forest.

Chapter 4: I'm Home... Welcome Back

By the time we left the Eimoor estate, it was already past noon. Half the day had come and gone. Unlike the trip to the capital, there was no need for me to hide on the way back; I could ride in the back with the luggage in the open air and take in the sights of the city. Camilo sat up in front next to a driver, who was one of the workers at his store. With this seating arrangement, it would look like I was in charge of keeping watch over the cargo.

The city was diverse and bustling, as befitting a nation's capital. A variety of different people and races mingled together in the crowd: there were beastfolk (part-feline ones and part-canine ones), dwarven women with short and stout builds, and dwarven men with thick beards. I also saw lizardmen, a race that seemed to have two distinct body types—ones who looked like bipedal lizards and ones who were covered in scales. I also saw a race of people called the Malito, who looked like children at first glance but with a distinctly mature demeanor. And of course, there were humans with all shades of skin and hair colors walking through the city.

There weren't any signs of discrimination. The humans didn't seem to hold any disdain for the beastfolk, for example. The different races were equals, walking on the streets and buying and selling in the shops.

A short while into our journey, we passed through a gate that demarcated the nobility and commoner districts. We rode for another hour before coming to the capital's outer gates. I'd been hunkered down in a chest on the way here, so I hadn't yet gotten a chance to see the gates. They were *massive*, arching upward nearly six meters. I couldn't contain my curiosity and asked Camilo about their construction.

"One of the former emperors had a close relationship with the giants. The gates were built to allow giants to pass through easily," Camilo explained. "That's the legend, at least, but who knows how true it is."

Interesting. I hope I get the chance to find out more about this world's history

and lore someday. Little by little, piece by piece.

Heading into the city, the guards had inspected the cargo, but there were no such precautions when leaving. One of the guards on duty glanced at us only briefly before moving on to the cart behind us. He wasn't being negligent, but rather, we didn't look suspicious...is what I wanted to believe. Truthfully, there was little value to checking people on their way out.

After passing through the gates, we emerged into the open. The pastoral scenery extended out all around us. The road and a river snaked through the green landscape like rough sketches drawn with brown and blue crayons. The river ran off into the distance, gleaming where the sunlight kissed the waters, and the road, too, extended beyond the horizon.

The green carpet was stitched together from grasslands and fields. I looked around and noticed a mountain range in another corner of the landscape. It looked as if it was a wall built to protect the beautiful scenery.

Based on the location of the river, I was positive that it eventually flowed into the lake in the Black Forest. What about the mountains? I hadn't seen any before, so I couldn't be sure.

The scenery continued unbroken as we progressed. The capital receded behind us until it disappeared into the horizon, and the mountains grew shorter and shorter until they flattened into the ground.

Since we were on the road that leads to the capital, we passed the occasional traveler, but for the most part, it felt like we were alone, riding under the infinite sky.

I soon tired of watching the landscape and distracted myself by conversing with Camilo. One topic I was curious about was the elven race since I hadn't seen any in the capital.

"Elves, huh?" Camilo mused. "The elves are a self-sufficient people and they rarely leave their own communities. You won't see any around these parts."

"That's too bad," I said.

But at least they're out there somewhere.

“Occasionally, they’ll come into town to buy something they need or travel in on a training expedition to improve their combat skills,” he explained. “I see all sorts of people in my line of work, but I can count on both hands the number of elves I’ve met.”

In the stories I’d read in my previous world, elves often roamed human cities freely, but the elves in this world were apparently the reclusive type. I’d been lucky enough to see a whole host of different races today, so I hoped that one day, I’d meet an elf too.

We continued to chat as we journeyed. The sky began to take on a rosy hue as the sun set. Since the cart was drawn by horses, we were traveling much faster than on foot. We would reach the forest drop-off before the sun fully dipped below the horizon; however, it would be dark before I could reach the cabin.

I’ll see if I can borrow a torch from Camilo. He can probably make it back to the city while the sun is still out, if barely.

When we reached the entrance to the forest, I hopped down from the cart, taking a torch and flint with me. I said my goodbyes to Camilo.

Just a little farther. I’m almost home.

I knew how to navigate home using my cheats and installed knowledge, so I hurried in the direction my instincts were pointing me. I tried to pay attention to my surroundings, but my emotions urged me to walk faster. Even at my brisk clip, the sun was catching up to me, and it would soon be completely dark. I hurried to ignite the torch while I still had a little bit of sunset left to see by. If I delayed any longer, it’d be too late.

I’d saved a bit of time in the beginning, but the dwindling light forced me to slow down. Plus, I now had to hold up the torch. I was now walking slower than we usually did as a group when we came back from town. Occasionally, I’d speed up without noticing, but I couldn’t afford to be careless. I tried to keep calm as I waded forward through the inky darkness of the forest.

It’s spooky after nightfall... We should avoid traveling in the dark.

I had just started to worry about the torch burning out when I emerged into

the clearing around my home. I hadn't been away for very long, but upon seeing the cabin, all of a sudden I felt a wave of nostalgia wash over me. I approached the door slowly.

It flew open when I was still a few steps short of the threshold. Samya, Rike, and Diana stood in the open doorway.

That surprised me!

I tried to greet them, but the words stuck in my throat.

The women beat me to the punch.

Samya called out to me first. "Welcome home, Eizo."

"We've been waiting for you, Boss," Rike said.

Diana closed it off with, "Thank goodness you're back, Eizo."

My heart swelled with warmth and the words I wanted to say bubbled up from within me.

"I'm home."

The three of them were all pleased to see me home in one piece. I also felt a surge of relief—and accompanying exhaustion—at having returned. I told Samya, Rike, and Diana that I would explain everything in the morning and then excused myself for the day. I dusted off from my travels, ate a simple meal, and headed straight to bed.

###

The next morning, after we ate breakfast together, I recounted the events in the capital. I hesitated over whether or not to explain Karel's fate, but in the end, Diana insisted. I finished my story without leaving anything out.

Diana had kept her head down as she listened, but when I was done, she raised her face and looked at me. "I... I can't believe that happened," she stammered haltingly. Her expression was contorted with sorrow. "Before all of this, Karel was always nice to everyone. I remember playing with him when I was little. He was so close to my father, Leon, and Marius."

The rest of us listened to her in silence.

“How could it have turned out like this?” Diana buried her face in her hands.

Rike and Samya hurried to comfort her.

They were a tight-knit family once upon a time. Had it all been a facade? Or had there been a trigger that caused such a drastic change in their relationships? There’s no way to know at this point.

Diana regained her calm after a while. “I’m sorry for losing my composure.”

“Don’t apologize,” I soothed. “It’s only natural. We wouldn’t want to associate ourselves with anyone who could find out about the death of their brother and keep calm. Besides, regardless of what he did before he died, it doesn’t change the fact that he was once your family and now he’s gone. Once you go back to the capital, you’ll have to pretend that none of this has happened, but while you’re here with us, you should grieve as much as you need.”

“Thank you, Eizo, truly,” Diana said with a small smile.

I waved off her words to hide my embarrassment.

“Oh, that’s right. Diana, I’ll see you off to the capital tomorrow morning.”

“Pardon?” she asked, surprised.

What is there to be shocked about? Wasn’t it always the plan for her to go back once the incident was resolved?

“The issue with the inheritance has been sorted out, and there’s going to be a banquet for your brother when he officially takes on the count title. Won’t you need to attend?”

“You’re right. I should be there...”

“I’ll be at the banquet as well,” I told her.

Since I had been acting as Marius’s guest from the north, Marius had said it would be suspicious for me to disappear right after the dispute. Apparently, the margrave was to attend the celebration as well, so I had no choice—I would be accompanying Diana all the way into the banquet hall.

Once I’d explained that I would be attending, Diana agreed to go.

“You’ll be away for another two or three days, then?” Rike asked.

“Yeah, looks like it,” I replied. “Sorry, you two.”

“I’ll be fine. Samya, on the other hand, might sulk if you’re gone too long,” Rike teased, grinning.

Samya blushed a fierce red. “Stupid—! What are you talking about, Rike?!” she cried.

The conversation ended in a round of laughter.

Since we wouldn’t be setting off until tomorrow, I decided to do a little bit of smithing while I had the chance. I’d been away from my workshop for several days, but my skills hadn’t gotten rusty; I was able to make an elite model as normal. I suppose it hadn’t been *that* long.

While I’d been gone, it seemed that Diana had gotten a lot of practice. She could now make an entry-level model, and her movements were confident and sure.

This is the last time we’ll all be gathered here together like this.

After we finished up in the workshop, I sparred one last time with Diana. It would be an exaggeration to say that she moved like a different person, but she had definitely improved. If she kept it up, she might even surpass me one day. It was a shame I wouldn’t be there when that day came, but I hoped she would continue to pour her heart into her training even once she was back home.

I prepared an extravagant dinner since it was Samya and Rike’s last day with Diana. As we ate, they chatted enthusiastically about anything and everything they could think of. The three of them seemed to be aware of the goodbye looming before them, or perhaps they’d simply bonded while I’d been away.

###

The next day, I woke up earlier than usual. I wanted to give us plenty of time to travel, so I completed my morning chores quickly.

We left the cabin together, proceeding into the forest, and I carried Diana’s bags. With my increased strength, they were as light as a feather, but she also hadn’t brought much with her when she’d fled from the capital. The two of us

made good time—we reached the edge of the forest significantly faster than usual.

There, we waited.

It wasn't long before Camilo came on his horse-drawn cart. He sat up front next to one of his clerks; Diana and I climbed up into the back alongside the cargo.

"G'morning," I greeted him.

"Hey," Camilo called back before turning his attention to Diana. "I'm afraid the ride may be rougher than you're used to, my lady. I beg your pardon in advance."

"Please, there is no need to concern yourself. You have graciously allowed me to travel with you, and you have been a great aid to my brother. I am in your debt."

"I do not deserve your kind words. We merchants are merely misers trailing after the scent of profit," Camilo said disparagingly.

The rare sight of a modest Camilo brought a smile to my face.

He quickly noted my bemusement. "I won't be forgetting this, Eizo."

I shrugged and said, "Oooh, scary," then gasped and made a show of shrinking back in mock terror.

The whole cart burst into laughter, and we set off toward the capital in high spirits.

The journey itself was uneventful. We soon reached the city gates and joined the queue of travelers. When it was our turn to be inspected, Camilo flashed a wooden token at the guard, who waved us through with a cursory glance at our cargo.

Afterward, I asked him, "What did you show them?"

"It's a tag that proves I have ties to the Eimoor house," he explained. "A handy trinket to have around."

"I bet."

That's right. He's backed by the Eimoor family now. I'm sure he'll make the most of that partnership.

After another hour and another gate (where, once again, the tag helped us), we arrived at the Eimoor estate, which was one of the few places I was familiar with in the capital. The cart drew to a stop. I climbed down and held out my hand toward Diana.

"Come, my lady," I said playfully.

Diana rolled her eyes and pursed her lips in irritation. "Don't give me that." But despite her irked expression and sharp tone, she took my hand and stepped down.

It's time for her to return to her household. The servants will take her from here.

I helped unload Diana's baggage, and by the time I was done, she had been surrounded by a ring of female servants. There were a few familiar faces from my last visit. Everyone looked ecstatic to have Diana back home.

What a touching reunion. It's been a while since they've seen her.

I passed the luggage over to one of the servants. Another servant led Camilo and me into the manor and showed us to a room where Marius was already waiting. It had only been two days since we'd last met, but Marius looked worn out and haggard.

I couldn't help but ask, "What happened to you?"

"Huh? Oh, well, I haven't had a second to rest since you left. The banquet itself is going to be on the small side, thank goodness, but I have my hands full preparing for my audience with His Majesty the King. There's also the formal report I need to submit, and the register, and a whole host of other things."

"You've had it rough."

Upper-class life had a whole different set of responsibilities and obligations. Listening to Marius, I was once again reminded of how ill-suited I'd be for life as an aristocrat.

"When is the banquet?" I asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“That’s so soon.”

“Too long has passed since the deaths of my father and eldest brother. Normally, there’d be ample time to prepare and lay groundwork for the banquet, but I don’t have that luxury. My succession needs to be confirmed as soon as possible.”

Marius’s concerns were a level above those of commoners like me.

“We’ll attend the celebration tomorrow and head home the day after, right?”

“Yes,” Marius replied. “But in the meantime, make yourselves at home.”

“Thanks for the warm welcome.”

Marius left after our conversation, and Camilo and I were shown to the guest rooms. A servant guided me to the space that’d been set aside for my stay. Before he left, he said, “If you need anything, please call.”

“I will. Thank you.”

The servant bowed and made his exit, leaving me alone.

The room was furnished with a desk, chair, and bed. A tapestry depicting a battle scene hung on one wall, wherein a valiant knight in full armor faced off against a hair-raising monster. This was likely the confrontation that’d led the king to promote the Eimoors to countship status and bequeath to them the treasure sword.

That sword had been a symbol of honor for the man who’d triumphed against this beast in combat. And yet, it had been dismissed as a fake without hesitation and tossed aside. I can’t say I was proud to have a hand in the events that had led to the blade’s disgrace, but as far as I could see, there hadn’t been a better way to resolve the situation. Still, I had mixed feelings about the fact that a sword I’d made had been used to break the original heirloom.

Did they keep the pieces? If so, I’d like to hold onto them. It’s a poor atonement, but I should discuss it with Marius later.

A little while before dinner, the same servant—who’d introduced himself as

Bowman—knocked on my door. He wanted to relay that Diana had requested to see me. When he asked for my response, I decided to agree to her summons.

Is she thinking what I think she is...?

Sure enough, I was led to a courtyard. Diana was also there, dressed in loose clothing, waiting with two wooden swords.

“You want to spar here?”

“But of course,” she said with a sly smile.

A lady shouldn't be making a face like that!

“I suppose I have no reason to refuse.” I shrugged. “Let's get started.”

Tapping our swords together, we bowed once before turning and putting some distance between us. We traded blow after blow, and the results played out similarly to our previous bouts. After an hour, I called for us to stop.

Diana was still catching her breath. Suddenly, between gulps of air, she asked, “Eizo...can you let me...see you at full strength...just this once?”

“My full strength, huh?” *Why not? Today is the last time we'll be able to spar together like this.* “All right. I'll show you what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

Diana adopted a general stance that allowed her to defend against all manner of attacks. I made sure she was ready and then sprang toward her at max speed and power. I was in her space before she had a chance to move a single muscle, and I slashed at her open neck with all my strength. My wooden blade stopped a hair's width away from making contact with the skin of her throat.



“That’s what I can do when I put my mind to it,” I declared.

Diana slumped in disappointment. “I couldn’t follow your movement at all.”

“You’ve already made rapid progress in just the last few days. If you keep training, there’s no telling how far you can go.” I lowered my sword.

At that, her expression brightened and hope lit up her face. “Really?”

My chest tightened painfully. *This is the last time I’ll see her smiling like that.*

After our sparring session, I took a bath and then headed down for dinner, which was a casual affair—only the members of the family were present. The conversation revolved largely around Diana’s time spent with Samya, Rike, and me in the cabin. Marius contentedly watched Diana as she told her story; Camilo listened attentively as well. From time to time, I chimed in with details of my own, and our discussion lasted until late into the night.

###

The next morning, Marius left for an audience with His Majesty the King. He had already submitted the necessary documents to the archives, so this was the final step of the inheritance proceedings; once the meeting was over, he’d officially be Count Eimoor as far as the country was concerned. Then, all that would be left was the celebratory banquet for family and their friends.

The servants, including Bowman, were running around left and right, overwhelmed with preparations. The banquet was going to be a private affair, but a number of influential guests had been invited. Camilo and I were also here as guests, but we were largely left to our own devices. Our breakfast and lunch consisted of scraps from the food that was being prepared for the celebration. After all, there were more important things to do than make our daytime meals.

Bowman and the other servants had initially planned to prepare food for me, but I’d refused. To tell the truth, I’d felt uncomfortable with the idea of being catered to and making them expend the effort to serve me. I mostly just tried to keep out of the way and I spent my free time wandering around the grounds of the estate. Unfortunately, I hadn’t gotten a chance to meet with Diana all day; she’d apparently gone with Marius for his appointment with the king.

The preparations for the banquet proceeded apace. Though, I wasn't sure if the non-contributions of Camilo and I made much of a difference... I suppose we'd never know.

Soon, it was showtime.

The banquet began, and servants showed the guests to their seats around a large table in the middle of the dining room. A variety of dishes had been laid out in the center of the table. As everyone got situated, servers came around to hand us all glasses filled with wine dispensed straight from a cask.

Once the guests had all arrived and while the wine was still being passed around, Marius rose to his feet. He was wearing a fine ensemble, decorated with ornate embroidery for the occasion. It was likely some specific formal dress that designated him as the head of the family.

And then, Marius began to speak—his resonant and sonorous voice filled the room. “Family, friends, and esteemed guests, I am honored that you could join us on this momentous occasion. Today, I, Marius Albert Eimoor, have officially taken on the title of count, and the position as head of the Eimoor family.”

Applause rang throughout the room. I glanced around and saw the margrave clapping as well.

“Without further adieu, I would like to propose a toast to the Eimoor family's prosperity and to our ongoing partnerships. Cheers!”

“Cheers!!!” The gathered guests all toasted together and took sips of the wine, which was excellent.

Marius was now Count Eimoor, the family head, in both the public record and in the opinions of those who mattered most. Thinking about Marius's success gave me a feeling of joy that was better than the high from even the strongest liquor.

After the speech came dinner, and the servers dished out portions from the food in the center of the table. There were many dishes that I'd never seen in the city, but several I thought I might be able to make myself.

Once I return home, I'll try to make them for Samya and Rike.

Dinner and dancing were standard for celebratory banquets. Although today's festivities were "informal" as far as high society was concerned, we still moved on to the dance portion of the schedule once all the guests had drunk and eaten their fill. That said, with everyone satiated by the meal, elaborate dances were no small feat. Instead, the dancing turned into standing around and enjoying conversations and finger food.

While everyone was chatting, I finally found a chance to talk to Diana. She had been making her rounds, jumping from one conversation to another, but I was able to slip in while she was in between guests.

"Do you have a moment to talk?" I asked.

"Good evening, Eizo. Your clothing suits you," she complimented.

I had come to the banquet in formal clothing. The margrave was in attendance, so I therefore had to maintain my backstory as Marius's friend from the north. Needless to say, I was supposed to be of high standing.

"I can't relax in this ensemble at all," I grumbled with a wry smile. It was half a joke and half a serious complaint. "You look beautiful in that dress. I can see why people call you 'the Rose.'"

Diana was wearing an exquisite dress befitting the occasion. The fabric had overtones of red and appeared ornate without being gaudy. Subtle embroidery only enhanced its beauty.

"How sweet your words are," she said, her face flushed.

Is she feeling shy or is it the alcohol?

"I'm serious. It suits you," I insisted. "It's hard to believe that this is the last time I'll see you."

"You never know where life takes you," Diana replied with a mischievous smile.

"What do you—" I started to ask her, but at that moment, she was swept away by another guest. I saw the margrave heading my way as well, so I had no choice but to give up my inquiry.

The margrave soon engaged me in conversation. As we talked, I leaned

heavily on my installed knowledge in order to act the part of a northerner. I stuck to short responses to avoid blowing my cover, knowing that I would be in trouble if I let myself get carried away. Couldn't have any holes showing up in my stories.

Nonetheless, I enjoyed the conversation. I felt like I was speaking with a kind uncle, and as we parted, the margrave patted my shoulder. "I hope you'll stand by the Eimoors. I'm counting on you." His words engraved themselves deep into my heart.

I didn't get to speak with Diana again for the rest of the banquet. When the night came to a close, the guests split off into two groups: one returning to their own homes, and the other retiring to guest rooms in the Eimoor estate.

I returned to my room as well. Some servants helped me out of my formal wear, and I immediately crashed into bed. Perhaps it was the wine I'd drunk, but I was dragged quickly into a deep and blissful slumber.

The next morning, it was time for me to head home. I realized that I may not have another chance to visit the capital for a while...though I could see myself occasionally coming here for some business or other.

If I ever come back, I'll make sure to visit Marius and Diana.

The luggage I'd needed for this trip was minimal, so it took no time at all to tidy up my things. It was still early in the morning, and I met Camilo by his wagon, where Marius and a few servants had gathered as well.

Diana was nowhere to be seen.

When I approached, Marius said, "Eizo, thank you for everything."

"Please, don't mention it. Like I told you, I'm only returning what I owe. Make sure you rule over your domain properly." He and I exchanged a firm handshake. Suddenly, I remembered a question I'd wanted to ask. "Oh, that's right, I almost forgot—what happened to the 'fake' sword?"

"I was actually hoping you would repair it since it was cut in half," Marius replied. "I've already packed it in with the cargo."

Repair it, huh? I suppose he'll want it back afterward.

"Should I return it to you once it's fixed?"

"Actually, can you hold on to it at your place?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It would be unusual for our family to keep the sword knowing that it's a fake," Marius explained. "Given the circumstances, it'd be best if you'd keep it."

And they'll keep the genuine heirloom safely stored away here.

Marius's logic made perfect sense, and I had no complaints either. "I'll fix it and keep it at my home then."

"I'm counting on you," Marius said. "Actually, there's one more matter I'd like you to look after for me. It's... Well, you'll see for yourself when you unpack the sword. Everything's in the same chest."

"Really? Another weapon?" I asked.

"Something like that. But beyond my skill to handle," he replied cryptically.

"If you're sure, I'll take it off your hands then."

"I trust your judgment in both matters. Feel free to do with them as you see fit."

I nodded. "Give my regards to Diana," I said in parting.

I climbed onto the back of the cart with the cargo, and we set off. Marius and the servants waved to us as we left, their silhouettes shrinking behind us until they were no bigger than specks in the distance. Soon, we'd left the capital behind as well.

Along the way, I tried to engage Camilo in conversation a few times, but he seemed oddly on edge. When I asked about his mood, he just gave me a noncommittal answer, so I gave it up and settled for small talk.

We reached the forest entrance at just past noon. Here, Camilo and I would be parting ways. The next time I'd see him would be at his shop.

"Don't forget to take the cargo from Marius with you," Camilo reminded me.

That's right! I nearly forgot.

"Which chest is it in?" I asked.

"The one right behind the driver's bench."

"This one?" I reached for the lid.

If I remember correctly, this is the chest that I hid in.

I opened the lid to find a cloth bundle and...a woman.

"Diana!" I cried out, forgetting my manners in my shock.

She smiled good-naturedly. "I hitched a ride."

"I can see that. What about your family?"

"My brother entrusted me with a message for you. It'll explain." She handed me the letter.

Written in Marius's hand was the following:

Hey Eizo,

If you're reading this, then it means that my, Diana, and Camilo's scheme was a great success. Oh, how I regret that I won't be there to see your shocked expression in person, but there's nothing to be done about that. I'll just have to use my imagination.

In any case, the other "matter" I want to entrust to you is Diana. Since I am now Count Eimoor, Diana's value in society has skyrocketed. She was always part of the family, but the circumstances were different with three older brothers ahead of her in line for succession. Now, she has just the one brother—me. I'm afraid that her rise in position will be accompanied by a rise in troublesome incidents. In the hopes of sparing her from such annoyances and headaches, I'd like to leave her with you for the time being.

PS: I meant what I said. I trust your judgment. Do with her as you like.

My eyes finished scanning the message, and I paused for a moment.

So that's how it is... Not that I don't understand his position, but this is a

rather heavy-handed approach.

Also, I chose to entirely ignore the postscript.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at the stunt, but I had to admit that I was happy to see Diana's smiling face again. "You've come all the way here, so how could I say no? Shall we go home?"

"Yeah! Thanks!" Diana cheered with a bright smile as she clambered out of the chest.

The two of us disembarked from the cart. I took the "fake" heirloom sword with me, shook hands with Camilo, and then we all said our goodbyes.

Diana and I started off into the forest together. We were traveling light, so there was little to slow us down. We made the journey mostly in silence, with a few words exchanged here and there. It wasn't that either of us was in a bad mood, but personally, I was at a loss for what to say.

When we were nearly home, Diana stopped abruptly. "Am I...a bother?" she mumbled.

I rushed to reassure her. "A bother? Not at all. If you were, I would've sent you straight home when I found you."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'm just your average rough and tumble blacksmith. What use have I for flattery? I haven't got the courage to lie to you at a time like this."

"It would be out of character..." she admitted.

"You weren't supposed to agree so easily!" I protested, and Diana snickered. "Come on. Let's go in already."

I opened the door and entered the cabin first. Diana spoke up from behind me.

"Hey, Eizo."

I turned around and looked at her.

"I'm back," she said.

“You mean, ‘I’m home,’” I corrected her gently. “You’re part of our family now.”

Upon hearing my words, she beamed. “Okay, do-over, do-over! Look away.”

I did as she instructed.

“Eizo! I’m home!”

I looked over my shoulder once more and smiled. “Welcome home, Diana.”



Chapter 5: Our New Normal

“In conclusion, from now on, Diana will be joining us as part of the family.”

My homecoming declaration was met with a round of applause. I only had an audience of two, but that was everyone who mattered. I felt relieved to have both Samya and Rike’s support.

Diana jumped in and said, “Thank you all for giving me such a warm welcome. I’m happy to see you both again.”

“Same here, Diana,” Samya said.

“It’s good to have you back,” Rike chimed in.

We’d been living together until a mere two days ago, so there was no awkwardness. However, the next question threw me for a loop.

“Everything went as planned, then?” Rike asked Diana cryptically.

“Exactly as you said it would,” she replied.

Um...what?

“What are you two talking about?” I interjected.

“That’s a secret. Sister to sister,” Rike said. “Right, Diana?”

“Yup!”

Apparently, Diana and Rike had gotten close when I wasn’t looking. It was a good thing, but it left me feeling a bit...lonely.

Regardless, there were more pressing matters. I walked toward my room, calling over my shoulder, “Diana, can you wait here a sec?”

My target was sitting on the bookshelf where I’d left it. I brought the object into the living room and offered it to Diana. “This is for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a custom knife that I forged. Everyone here has one for self-protection. It

means you're part of the family now."

Diana took the knife, her eyes sparkling with delight. She slid the blade from its sheath and looked it over.

"As you can probably tell just by looking, the edge is very sharp. Be careful when you use it."

"I will," she promised. "It's exquisite."

"I know! It's the best one that Boss has made. A true masterpiece!" Rike gushed.

Why's she always the one who gets to boast in times like these?

Samya was watching the scene with an exasperated but fond grin.

And from now on, Diana's smile would become a part of our usual tableau. Just the thought of it warmed my heart.

I took up my regular dinner duties and prepared a meal of cured meat simmered in wine. I served it with flatbread and root vegetable soup. I also brought out wine to drink for the occasion. This was our own personal banquet to celebrate Diana becoming part of our family.

"I can now say for sure that your cooking is the absolute best," Samya declared with feeling.

"Is it?"

Rike immediately backed Samya up. "Definitely. We took turns while you were gone, but not once did we make anything that tasted better than your food. I used to cook back at my family workshop, so it wasn't like the task was new to me either."

Diana averted her gaze. I took that to mean that cooking *had* been a new experience for her.

"Then it's a good thing I'm back, right?"

"Yes, it is. Especially when it comes to food," Rike said with a chuckle.

We all joined in laughing as well.

As we ate, I told Samya and Rike all about the food that was served at the

Eimoor family banquet. Our first evening together as a family of four was filled with warmth and mirth.

###

The following day, I ran through my usual list of morning tasks, starting with a trip to the lake for water.

I also had something that I wanted to discuss with the others over breakfast. “We have at least a one-week supply of entry-level swords and knives, right?”

“Yes, Boss,” Rike replied. “We continued to make them even while you were away.”

“That should be plenty of stock to give Camilo the next time we see him.”

“Me and Diana helped too,” Samya said. “We should have more than enough.”

“Good. Let’s start on building a new room then,” I suggested. “For Diana.”

“Is that okay?” Diana asked.

“It’s not a matter of being okay or not. You’re family now, so you should have a proper room in the house.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me just yet,” I teased. “You’ll be helping out with construction, after all.”

True to character, Diana didn’t seem to mind a bit. “It’s only fair.”

Building the new space would keep us busy for the next week.

We’d been careful to keep an ample supply of wood, so we had plenty—enough to build two rooms. But the unsaid conclusion to that sentence was that we would be completely out of wood after building two rooms. So, I took up an ax and set myself to the task of increasing our lumber supply by cutting down a few more trees around the cabin. The trees fell with ease at the touch of my ax. By the time I was done, the clearing felt a little wider.

At some point, I should dig out these stumps and plant new seedlings in their

place.

As I was cutting down the trees, the other three were also working; they cleared and leveled the ground where the new room would be built, and then prepared the foundation. Samya, Rike, and Diana were all stronger than the average person, so between their combined strength and Rike's previous construction experience, the work took considerably less time than it had previously.

However, there was one tiny, minuscule detail that bothered me.

"Is it just me...or have you cleared out enough space for *two* rooms?" I asked.

It definitely wasn't just me, but what I didn't understand was why. After all, we only needed to build a room for Diana.

"Knowing you, Eizo, our family's gonna grow again sooner or later," Samya sassed.

"No, that's not—"

—*going to happen.*

I couldn't finish that sentence.

Samya, Rike, and Diana had all been unplanned additions to the family. Something could very well happen again in the future that would result in us taking in another new person. Rather than rushing to build another room when the time came, it *would* be better to act proactively and build the extra room now. Their reasoning made a lot of sense.

"I suppose we could always use the second room as storage," I relented.

Samya exhaled a sigh of relief, nodded, and then returned to work.

###

The next five days went by like clockwork.

Wake up. Morning chores. Room construction. Lunch. Construction part two. Spar with Diana. Dinner. Retire.

The work on the two rooms was smooth sailing, possibly since we'd already done this once before. By the fifth day, we were nearly done. The two new

rooms looked identical to Samya and Rike's. We also cleared some space to extend the existing corridor. Now all that remained were the doors and furnishings.

"Just a bit more and we'll be done," I announced.

"Yeah, I can't believe it!" Diana hadn't been with us when we'd built the originals, so she was particularly moved at seeing the rooms come together.

"We'll put in the doors and beds tomorrow. Those are the last pieces we'll need to build ourselves. And the day after that, we'll visit Camilo in the city to drop off the new swords and knives. You'll be coming with us, right, Diana?"

"Of course I will," she said. "It's part of the family business."

"The family blacksmithing business... We're an odd family, aren't we?" I remarked. "A member of the beastfolk, a dwarf, the younger sister of a count, and me, your average, stubborn geezer. What a forge I've created..."

Diana snickered. "It's a pretty bizarre business."

I returned her amusement with a wry smile. "You won't catch me denying that."

Just like that, we were moving toward a new kind of normal, with small moments and conversations sliding into place like bricks.

###

The next day, we gathered the materials needed for the doors and beds. We cut the wood to size and started putting everything together. There were still hinges and nails left over from last time, so we could save some time. Preparation was the key to success.

I entrusted the beds to Samya and Rike while I worked with Diana to make the doors. Diana would be making the door to her very own room, so I hoped she'd put her heart into it. That being said, she had no previous experience with carpentry, so I had to guide her along. Also, I helped her build the frame; it would've been troublesome if the frame had turned out warped, causing the door not to fit.

However, Diana handled the rest herself, taking to the hammer like a fish to

water. Did her skills with the sword translate to carpentry in some way?

After a while, she said, “This is fun.”

“Isn’t it? Woodworking alone and silently may get tiresome, but it’s enjoyable when we get to work all together on the same goal.”

“It’s really growing on me.”

“This kind of work rolls around once in a while. Can you handle it?”

“Of course,” Diana said with a laugh. “If I wasn’t prepared to get my hands dirty, I wouldn’t have come here.”

Diana’s laugh was infectious, and I chuckled too. “That’s what I like to hear.”

Since Rike and Samya had built a few beds before, they finished before we did—Samya called over to us when they were done.

“Good work!” I told her. “Can you move them into the rooms?”

“Got it.” Samya turned to Diana. “Are you fine with the closer bedroom?”

“Yes, that would be great,” Diana responded.

“Gotcha. Let’s do it, Rike.”

“Okay. Can you lift up that side, Samya?”

Samya had the strength of a tiger, and Rike was a dwarf. Between the two of them, they lifted the bed with ease, making it look lighter than air as they carried it away into Diana’s soon-to-be room.

“Time for us to finish up this door!” I exclaimed with renewed energy.

“All right!” Diana agreed.

In the end, the door took us a little longer, but I was pleased with the final product.

“Looks good. It’s well made,” I commented once it was completed.

“Really?” Diana replied.

“Yes. It’s not a trivial task to join the planks neatly without gaps, and you did just that.”

“That’s a relief. I was worried that I’d end up making something completely unusable.”

“Not on my watch,” I said. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then trust me when I say you did a good job. Don’t worry,” I reassured her, “I’m not trying to flatter you. Now, let’s go install it.”

Diana wasn’t as strong as Samya and Rike, but she was no slouch. We carried the door together to the room, but I installed it by myself.

With the bed and door installed in their respective places, the new room was officially complete.

“Diana, this will be your space from now on. Though I have to admit, it’s probably a little smaller than what you’re used to in your family’s estate.”

“I knew what I was signing up for, so I have no complaints. I don’t need that much space for just myself anyway.”

“All right.”

I could see that Diana was doing her best to adapt to our lifestyle. She’d had time to get used to living here to some extent before the confrontation with Karel, but back then, she’d been a guest, not a full-time resident. In any case, I really appreciated the effort she was putting in.

Rike turned to Diana with a big grin. “Now you’re truly a part of the family!”

“Thanks, Rike. And to you too, Samya. I’m glad to be with all of you.”

“Welcome! I can promise one thing: you’ll eat like a queen while you’re here!” Samya said with pride.

But I’m the one who has to make those meals. Not that I’m displeased to hear how highly Samya thinks of my cooking...

We moved Diana’s luggage from the guest room into her permanent room, then called it a night.

###

The following day, we went into the city to drop by Camilo’s shop and

replenish his inventory. Diana had been in hiding during our last trip, so it was our first time going all together. Rike and I pulled the cart with the cargo while Samya and Diana kept watch.

We traveled at our normal pace. Once in a while, Diana would get excited at the sight of a grass rabbit or other small critter. The animals were undeniably cute, but I hoped she wouldn't start to have second thoughts about eating them. We took a short rest in the forest and then continued onward to the city road.

When we reached the edge of the forest, we paused at the tree line to check our surroundings.

"I don't see anyone. What about you?" I asked the others.

"I haven't sensed anyone besides us," Samya confirmed. "Diana?"

Diana nodded in agreement. "Same goes for me."

Thankfully, it appeared that we were in the clear.

"Then let's go," I said. Pulling the cart along, we set off on the city road.

We'd traveled this road many times before, but since Diana was here today, it felt fresh and exciting in an indescribable way.

This particular road was generally safe, owing to the discipline and diligence of the city. It would be foolish to drop our guard completely, but the risk of being robbed was rather low. I hoped the guards weren't short on manpower now that Marius was gone, though it wasn't anything I could personally help with.

Naturally, I'd always offer aid when I could.

As usual, we made it to the city without running into anything or anyone. I didn't recognize the guard at the gate, so I gave only a perfunctory greeting and went to enter the city. However, the guard stopped me. "You've added a new person to your group."

Tons of people must pass through here every day. He's got a good memory.

"Yes, you're right," I said.

“You lucky dog,” he teased. “Can’t say I’m not jealous, lady-killer.”

“It’s not like that at all,” I protested.

“Sure, sure,” he said. “But, in all seriousness, I’ll need to check your new member’s eyes and wrists. You don’t mind, do you, miss?” He directed the last question at Diana.

“Please, go ahead,” she answered.

The guard carefully inspected her eyes and wrists, then straightened. “Thanks for cooperating. Sometimes, people try to slip slaves or kidnapped children into the city under our noses. You can tell if someone is being coerced by looking at the wrists and eyes, but the details are a trade secret. Anyway, you all can go on in.”

“Thanks,” I said.

We all nodded our gratitude as we proceeded through the gate.

As we went, I thought over what the guard had just told us. What an interesting skill to have. I suppose it was something you picked up when you met as many people as he did in a day, though it wasn’t a *pleasant* skill by any means. I was sure he’d faced his share of hardships.

I couldn’t tell if he’d realized that Diana was the daughter of a noble family, but if he had, he’d kept quiet, a courtesy I was grateful for.

Once inside the gates, we headed straight to Camilo’s shop. When we arrived, we left the cart in the storehouse. The staff and head clerk were familiar with us by now, so they guided us to the conference room immediately. We followed them up the stairs to the second floor. I had the feeling that there were more workers than usual, both in the storehouse and on the shop floor.

Camilo didn’t keep us waiting for long.

I greeted him casually as he entered the room. “Hey, good to see you.”

He returned my greeting with a brief, “You too.” He then noticed Diana in our company and a look of momentary surprise crossed his face. “Oh, right. I forgot that Lady Diana was staying with you now.”

“Yup. All thanks to you guys and your schemes.”

“What can I say? Mischief is in our blood. You knew that.”

“I did,” I conceded. “By the way, did you hire new workers?”

“Yes. Thanks to all that has happened, profits have soared through the roof. Now that I’m an official supplier of the Eimoor family, it’s not enough to send a person to the capital and set up a makeshift booth in the marketplace. I’ll need to set up a shop there, even if it’s small.”

To use an analogy from Earth, Camilo was planning to set up a branch office in Tokyo with headquarters in Osaka. The expansion seemed feasible if all he wanted was a bare minimum storefront. However, if the shop in the capital was going to be a major branch with its own storage, it would be quite burdensome to manage.

“Sounds like congratulations are in order.”

“Indeed. It’s good news,” Camilo said. “Now, on to business. I’m assuming you want your usual?”

I nodded, then asked, “Do you have any brandy? And bedding? We need two sets if you have them in stock.”

“Of course. Shall I deduct the cost from your usual earnings?”

“Yes, please do. Thanks.”

Camilo made eye contact with the head clerk, who nodded and left the room.

While Camilo’s staff loaded up our cart with the items we’d requested, I chatted with him about what had happened at the capital. Samya and Rike seemed to enjoy listening to our stories; Diana and I had left out some details the first time. Even Diana was occasionally surprised by parts of the story.

Once the cart was ready, we departed from Camilo’s store. The city wasn’t as large or as populated as the capital, but it was just as lively. Even in the hustle and bustle of the crowd, we stood out. Three women with one man and a cart full of goods (pulled by Rike and me) certainly drew people’s attention.

But the cart was really what stood out. If it weren’t for that, we would’ve been one of several similar parties; there *were* other groups with diverse members. They all looked like adventurers attired for travel, like the ones I’d

read about in stories back on Earth.

I caught myself gazing at the adventurer parties. I'd been reborn into this world as an old, rugged blacksmith archetype, but with a different set of cheats, I could've lived a nomadic life.

Samya caught me staring. "Don't tell me you have a secret desire to roam the world, Eizo," she said, a hint of reproach in her voice.

From her tone, I could tell that she wasn't the only one invested in the answer. She was speaking on behalf of Rike and Diana to some extent.

"Not a chance. I was already driven out of the north and had to make my way here. A harsh life on the road is not what I'm looking for." I made my excuses with lies encased in truth.

I was nervous that Samya would see right through me, but certain circumstances had pushed me into this world. Though the details were unusual, the broad strokes lined up with the truth.

I gamely continued on. "I wouldn't mind a trip for fun, but I'm not interested in anything more permanent than that."

"If you say so." Samya seemed to lose interest in the conversation and didn't question me any further. I let out a discreet sigh of relief, knowing that my cover story was still intact.

Rike and Diana exhaled sighs of their own.

"What's wrong, you two?"

"I've always worried about this side of you, Boss," Rike began. "Your skills as a blacksmith are unparalleled, and no one's going to challenge you in a fight. Sometimes I get the feeling that you're going to disappear without a word. I think Samya feels the same way—that's why she asked."

Diana nodded in agreement.

Can't deny that I have a history... My disappearance from Earth was nothing if not sudden.

"I wouldn't leave without at the very least telling my family," I assured them. "Trust me."

“Good!” Rike said, and all three smiled in what I thought was relief.

We continued toward the cabin, keeping an eye on our surroundings, and soon, we were home. Luckily, we hadn’t run into any trouble on the way. Other than the hiccup with Diana at the city fence, the trip had been uneventful. Peace was truly a blessing. I didn’t know if there was a god in this world, but if there was, I owed them my thanks.

At home, we first unloaded the supplies. Samya and Diana brought the brandy and salt into the house; Rike and I stored the ore and charcoal away in the workshop.

We were resupplying the ore at a faster rate than we could use it up, but it wasn’t a bad idea to have a stockpile in case anything happened. We had the space, so it wasn’t a problem to take in extra from Camilo. It would, however, be prudent to build a dedicated storehouse sooner rather than later.

Once we had everything stashed away, Samya called over to me. “Eizo!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing wrong, but it smells like rain. Based on the air currents, the storm’ll last a while,” she said.

“How long is ‘a while’?”

“Not sure, but no more than a week, I’d say. Three days or so.”

“I see.” I turned to think.

We don’t have enough water jugs to store three days’ worth of water, but I can at least go to the lake tonight to fetch tomorrow’s portion. The round trip is only thirty minutes.

After I’d returned from the lake with the water, I busied myself with dinner. Today, I was cooking our usual menu. We’d restocked our pepper, so I seasoned the soup generously with it.

Over dinner, we talked about the places that Diana (who had occasionally gone on trips with her father) and Rike had traveled.

“You can mine iron ore in those mountains?” I asked Diana in response to one of her stories.

“That’s right. Father wanted weapons made of superior quality ore, and I accompanied him on an inspection trip.”

The mountains in question were the ones I’d seen over by the capital. Apparently, they were flush with ore. If I had the opportunity, I’d like to visit someday.

In the middle of the night, the rain started coming down on us, hard. It kept raining at an unrelenting pace all throughout the next day. I thanked my past self for having the foresight to refill our water in advance since I wouldn’t have wanted to be outside in this weather.

We spent the day in the forge smelting ore and making plate metal. From now on, Diana would be helping as well.

The process was simple: melt the ore in the furnace and hammer out the metal. This work was routine and didn’t require much concentration, certainly not the same care and precision required for smithing a blade. We kept the furnace hot the entire day, churning out metal plates one after another. By the end, we had made plenty for our stock.

Diana had been quieter than usual, perhaps because the work was new to her. It was undeniably hot and exhausting labor.

“Good job, Diana,” I told her as we were cleaning up.

“Do you do this often?” she asked.

“Often enough. Once every week or so. We would quickly run out if we didn’t.”

“Now I know why all of you are so strong.”

“That might be true for me, but Samya and Rike have always been strong,” I remarked with a smile.

Part of my strength comes from cheats though...

When Samya and Rike overheard our conversation, they both started flexing and showing off their muscles. They were just playing around, but both of them

did have the physiques of professional athletes.

Diana burst out laughing while watching their antics, and with that happiness filling the forge, we brought the day's work to an end.

###

Just as Samya had predicted, the rain did not let up the next day. Luckily, it lightened enough for me to at least make my routine morning trip to the lake. In the hope of staying dry, I refilled our water jugs and returned to the cabin as quickly as possible. However, by the time I reached home, I was dripping.

"I'm soaked!" I called as I burst through the door.

"Welcome home," Diana replied. She held out a cloth. "Here. Take this and dry yourself off."

I grabbed it and offered my thanks.

She answered with a bright smile. "Don't mention it."

A wave of bashfulness suddenly washed over me, and I hurried back to my room before my face could reveal how I was feeling.

"Today, I'm going to try something new," I declared.

My news was met with a round of soft applause from the other three.

"What are you going to make, Boss? Don't keep us in suspense." Rike was practically bouncing out of her seat, and her eyes twinkled like stars. It was moments like this that Rike's love really shined through. Love for blacksmithing, that is.

"I'm making a halberd!"

"A what?" Samya asked with a quizzical tilt of her head. She must not have been familiar with the weapon.

I shouldn't be surprised. Halberds aren't used much outside of a battlefield. Even the guards in the city only carry short spears.

"Think of it like a cross between a spear and an ax," I explained.

"Sounds like it can do some major damage in a fight," said Samya.

“You’re right. It can.”

The halberd was a versatile weapon. It could do much more than just slicing and piercing, but that didn’t mean it was useful in *every* situation.

“But what are you going to do after you make one?” Diana asked. “Sell it?”

“Yes. I have a buyer in mind,” I replied with a sly grin. “I’ll make five to start, just as a test run.”

Diana pressed me further. “Where are you planning to sell them?”

“To the city guards, or, to be more precise, their patron. In other words, I want to make a deal with your brother.”

The guards were currently equipped with short spears. They received their weapons from the city lord, who was none other than the newest head of the Eimoor family. As the third son of the count, Marius must’ve become a city guard because he wanted to better understand the land that his family ruled over. Normally, a man of his background would’ve been promoted to commander right away, but Marius wouldn’t have approved of such blatant nepotism.

During his tenure as a city guard, Marius must’ve realized how deficient the equipment was; otherwise, he wouldn’t have bought a sword from me. Not just that, but he’d even gone out of his way to buy it as a personal item and then bring it to his guard shift under a flimsy excuse. He’d also probably been holding back out of consideration for his father and older brother.

This time, I was planning to forge the halberds as equipment for the guards and then negotiate a sale with the Eimoors. I was hopeful that an agreement could be reached. If not, I’d see if Camilo would purchase them instead. And if Camilo turned me down, well...I’d cross that bridge if I came to it.

My plan might be taking advantage of Marius’s position, but of course, I would deliver on my end too. I’d make halberds that were certainly worthy of a count. The guards might need special training to use the weapon, but that’d be a problem for Marius to solve.

Diana considered my plan for a moment before coming to a conclusion. “You’re right. My brother may be interested.”

“I’m glad you agree. Rike, while I’m working on this project, I’m counting on you to make the entry-level models with Samya and Diana.”

“Of course, Boss,” Rike responded. “Samya, Diana, we’ll be working on shortswords today.”

“Kay,” replied Samya.

Diana followed suit. “All right!”

We soon got down to business.

I would be starting with the spear-like component of the halberd: the pike. If I’d been making a normal spear, the pike would’ve had to double as a cutting blade. However, a halberd’s pike was used exclusively for piercing, since halberds also possessed ax blades for slashing.

I first slid a plate of metal into the fire to heat. Once the metal was hot enough to be malleable, I shaped the pike, working it into a short and squat pyramid. I kept the pike at a modest length—an overly long one might snap under stress, and I didn’t want to risk that. The bottom end I left temporarily unworked since I would later attach it to the wooden handle, or haft, of the halberd. I then set the pike aside.

Next, I moved on to the ax head. To start, I heated up two more plates of metal with the goal of welding them together. I spread a layer of straw ash on one plate and placed the other plate on top. The ash sandwiched between the metal would help modulate the temperature at the seam of the two plates, and would also help the plates adhere evenly. After that, I transferred the metal to the anvil.

When the two plates were welded together, I proceeded to form the head of the ax.

Once attached, the ax would constitute the “x-axis” of the halberd’s head, while the pike would make up the “y-axis.” In other words, the horizontal center of the ax would run perpendicular to the rest of the halberd.

For the ax’s shape, I was aiming for a rough isosceles triangle, so I held that image in my head as I worked. The apex point of the triangle was hooked,

similar to the beak of a hawk; from that point, the two longer sides of the ax flowed outward in a gentle slope toward the shorter, sharpened side. This cutting edge was slightly curved, and I shaped it a bit like the crust of a pizza slice.

When I'd completed the two halves of the halberd's head—the spear pike and the hooked ax blade—I was ready to assemble. I opened a conical space along the center axis of the ax head. Then, I slotted the base of the pike into place and welded the two pieces together.

I was now nearly done with the halberd's head; the final steps were quenching, tempering, and sharpening. I relied on my cheats to judge when the metal was at the ideal temperature, where I should hammer to maintain the shape, and how to work the piece to preserve its quality. This was the first halberd I'd ever forged, so I wanted to make an elite model—I kept my focus locked in throughout the process.

Eventually, I would have to attach the head and end cap—I'd decided on a slightly spiked one—to the haft, but...it wouldn't hurt to finish that up later. The wood for the haft was unfortunately outside, beyond my reach. While the work to attach all the parts was similar to the process for other weapons, it was time-consuming to pry open the socket for the haft at the base of the head. Without my cheats, it would've been impossible to forge a whole halberd so quickly.

I'd been able to complete the head in a short amount of time, but only relatively speaking—my cheats and installed data might've helped me along the way, but I'd spent half the time experimenting and fumbling around. It'd taken most of the day to forge just the head.

I'll have to wake up earlier tomorrow...

Since I had extra time, I also wanted to forge a replacement for the self-defense knife I'd sacrificed during the Eimoor dispute. This one needed to be a custom model, so I spared no effort, going all out from the first stroke of the hammer. I concentrated fixedly on the composition of the steel to make sure it was perfectly even.

By the time I'm done, the metal will gleam.

I hammered the plate until the metal was beautiful and uniform, then I moved on to forming the blade. The process of shaping and quenching knives was now intimately familiar to me, so the only difference between smithing an entry-level and a custom model was my level of concentration.

The completed knife had the dazzling luster that I'd come to expect from my custom models. *What a relief.* Why hadn't I been able to pull the same effect out of the blades I'd made back in the Eimoor's forge? It was still a mystery, but whatever the issue had been, I was glad it didn't affect me this time. Right now, that's what mattered.

Rike and the others gathered around me as I inspected the knife.

"Wow, when you put your mind to it, Boss, the blades you make are unparalleled in their beauty," Rike said with a spellbound expression. When she was looking at a well-forged blade, Rike's intensity was a little bit frightening.

"I can't confess to know as much about blacksmithing as Rike does," Diana said, "but it's a gorgeous knife."

Samya gave her compliments as well. "I'm an amateur too, but even I can tell it's amazing."

"Thank you, all three of you. But my skills failed me while I was in the capital."

"Are you serious?" asked Rike.

"Yeah. I had to melt down my own knife and make an alloy before I could forge a sword that was good enough."

"Is that why you're making a custom model knife today?" Rike wondered.

"You guessed it. But I was able to forge this knife with no problems today, so maybe there's something special about this place."

The other three pondered my theory, but none of them came up with any ideas.

"If that's true, the only downside would be that I can't move away from here...but I had no intention of leaving in the first place, so it's moot." I laughed loudly.

Someday, I may be forced to abandon this cabin against my will. Just in case,

when I have the time, I should investigate why my previous attempt failed. We weren't able to come up with an answer even after pooling all of our knowledge and experience (including the installed data). That means we would likely need the insight of an expert. But first, I'll have to figure out what kind of expert...

Regardless, I decided to set the matter aside for now. "This is the perfect time for us to stop working and go eat dinner."

"Whoopee!" Samya yelled, and Rike chided her lightly.

###

We woke up to our third straight day of rain, as Samya had predicted, but the squall had weakened to a drizzle. I even managed to go out for water without getting soaked to my skin.

When I returned, I said to the others, "I hope it'll stop tomorrow."

"Me too," Diana replied. "The laundry's piling up."

We hadn't been able to do laundry in three days, so the pile of dirty clothes had grown into a small mountain. Luckily, we each had enough underwear to last us five days. There was still some leeway, but if the rain didn't let up tomorrow, we would be in trouble. Nothing to do about it but pray.

Today, I was working on halberds again, while Rike led the other two in forging entry-level models. Samya and Diana were slowly but surely growing more comfortable and skilled. Considering their progress, they might not need my help for entry-level models at all anymore—I could start focusing solely on my own projects. Together, the three of them had made an impressive amount of items yesterday.

Over the course of my work today, I forged two halberd heads, following the same process as the day before, and two spiked caps for the hafts. Unlike a knife or sword, the halberd was quite labor-intensive to make. Even if I was only making entry-level models, I wouldn't be able to work fast enough to produce a large quantity. All things considered, making spears was probably a better use of my time.

I'd finished the components of the halberd, but the day wasn't over quite yet. I used the remaining hours of daylight to replenish Samya's supply of

arrowheads. Once the rain stopped— tomorrow, hopefully—Samya and Diana would likely go out to hunt or gather since our supply of meat was starting to dwindle. We had enough to last us another week, perhaps two if we really stretched it, but I didn't want us to live such a miserly life. Besides, it'd be good to have a full supply for the future. You never knew when another long bout of rain would come along.

###

The next day, the rain did, in fact, stop. Samya's forecast had been spot on. When I went outside in the morning, the ground was still wet and water droplets sparkled on every leaf. The world glowed gold under the light of the rising sun, and the shadows under the trees added a layer of contrast to the picture. The scene looked like it was a piece of artwork, painted by the brush of a master. Dawn was called the golden hour for a reason.

I went to the lake, returning with refilled water jugs; Samya, Rike, and Diana used the water to start washing the laundry that had piled up. They had to use more water than usual since there were three days worth of clothes; when most of the water was gone, with no sign of finishing soon, I went out for one more trip to the lake. They didn't need me around anyway.

I didn't normally help out with the laundry because I couldn't bring myself to wash the women's underwear. Their underclothing wasn't sexy or anything like the lingerie you'd see back in my previous world. However, even if my housemates didn't mind me touching their unmentionables, I couldn't help but feel antsy at the idea. I did all of the cooking anyway, so I hoped they'd overlook my lack of contribution toward laundry efforts.

We ate breakfast later than usual, and after that, Samya and Diana left to go hunting. Samya was in a good mood, apparently because of the new arrowheads. I asked Rike why Samya was so happy, but her response was cryptic. "A maiden's heart wants what it wants," she recited.

Exactly what kind of maiden's heart is she talking about?

As for the blacksmithing team, I was continuing with halberds while Rike was forging entry-level knives; neither were items that Samya and Diana could help out with.

With both of us working simultaneously, the workshop was filled with the repeated clanging of hammer striking metal. The pitches produced by Rike's hammer and my hammer were subtly different since we were forging different things. The combination of tones had a musical quality to it as if she and I were duetting with instruments of different sizes. It produced a delightful soundtrack to our work.

When I had a minute to spare, I went over to watch Rike work, and it was clear that she'd improved—the metal was definitely more uniform overall. At times like these, I wished I could say, "I can tell that you're starting to hear the voice of the metal." Unfortunately, since my skills were cheats, I didn't quite understand the whole "voice" thing myself. Rike instead seemed to learn primarily by watching me and taking note of where and how I hammered the metal. It wasn't ideal, but letting her steal my techniques was the only way I knew to teach her.

Since Rike kindly let me observe her while she forged her knife, I repaid the favor by letting her watch me make an elite model halberd head. The process was entirely different from the smithing she was used to. I had already finished making one, so this was to be my second halberd of the day.

The pike, the sharp ax head, and the hooked ax beak were all forged differently to create their unique shapes; this was a good opportunity for her to observe and learn how to make separate components and weld them together. When I was done joining the pieces of the head, I passed the whole thing over to her.

"What do you think?"

She inspected it closely before responding with the careful analysis I'd come to expect from her. "Each individual piece is beautifully made and the weld is clean. You can't tell where one piece ends and another begins."

I was relieved that the quality cleared the bar of Rike's exacting standards.

"Was this helpful to your studies?"

"Yes. I am still far from reaching your level, Boss, but now that I'm seeing this, I can think of a few things I'd like to try in my own work."

“Good to hear. I wish I could teach you properly, but I just don’t have the words to explain what I do.”

“Not at all,” she assured me. “You’re too kindhearted. Learning through observation is quite normal.”

“Anytime you want to observe me as I work, don’t hesitate to say so, okay?”

“Yes, Boss.” Rike’s eyes burned with determination. “I won’t let you down!”

These past three days, I’d made a total of five halberd heads. Since I still had time left today, and it had stopped raining, I figured I would try to put the halberds together.

I brought in some wood pieces from our stockpile outside, then made five shafts that were each two meters long. The work took no time at all thanks to my custom model knife and my installed data. I’ve said it over and over again, but I truly owe everything to my cheats.

Finally, I affixed the heads and end caps to the hafts using nails, which meant that the halberds were, at last, complete. I wanted to try it out for myself, but the workshop was not nearly spacious enough for me to be swinging around a two-meter-long weapon.

So, I decided to take my experiment outdoors.

If I’d waited until later in the day to come outside, the sun, which had painted the world a bright gold in the morning, would’ve dimmed to a gentle rosy light. However, it wasn’t yet dusk, so the sky was still blue.

I squared off against an imaginary opponent and hefted the halberd into position. First, I tried out a few different movesets, including simple swings, thrusts with the spiked tip, brutal slices with the ax blade, and low sweeps with the hooked side of the ax.

The ax’s blade and beak were well balanced, as were the head and the haft ends of the halberd overall. The initial learning curve was steep, but once you were used to the feel of the weapon, it proved far more versatile than a short spear.

I repeated each move several times, only stopping once the sun had sunk down low on the horizon. With the setting of the sun came the end of my drills and the workday.

The moment I stopped, I was met with the sound of not one but three sets of clapping. I turned to see Samya and Diana lined up next to Rike.

“When did the two of you get back from hunting?” I asked.

“A while ago,” Samya replied. “We’re home.”

“It’s good to be back,” Diana said. “I didn’t realize that you knew how to wield a halberd, Eizo.”

“Welcome home, both of you. And my halberd skills are...as you saw.”

I didn’t think I was any better with the halberd than I had been with a longsword. But then again, apparently my swordsmanship was astounding. If Diana was commenting on my prowess, then I was probably up to snuff.

Should I make one or two to keep around the cabin for defense?

“More importantly, now that you’re home, let’s eat. Samya, Diana, I want to hear about how your hunt went too.”

“Oh yeah! Boy, do I have a story for you!” Samya jumped right into her tale as we headed indoors.

Chapter 6: Tune-Up

Early the next morning, all of us ventured to the lake to bring back Samya and Diana's spoils from the previous day—a ginormous boar. “Ginormous” had been Samya's word choice, but she hadn't been exaggerating. The boar was indeed a monster. Back in my previous world, boars could reach a weight of as much as seventy kilograms (or so I'd heard), but this one would easily weigh that much even after we gutted it. By the time we skinned and butchered it, the meat cuts would weigh much less than seventy kilos, but that supply would still easily last us two weeks.

We made a carrying pallet and loaded the boar onto it. It was heavy, but between the four of us, the weight was manageable. We worked together to drag it back home where we butchered it, yielding plenty for storage.

“We won't have to worry about meat for a while,” I commented. We then moved on to preserving the cuts. Some of it we would cure and some we would dry. Of course, I also set aside a fresh portion for today's meals.

“I won't need to hunt again until next week, right?” Samya asked.

“Yeah, that seems perfectly fine.”

“Hmm, then what animal would be fun to take down?” Samya mused to herself. She was always in a good mood after a successful hunt.

“Besides boar and deer—and bears, I guess—what other big creatures are there in this forest?” I wondered.

“Those are all the large animals. A step down the game ladder, you might also see giant tanuki roaming around here once in a while.”

“Giant tanuki?”

“They're usually around this big.” Samya indicated the size with her hands. Her palms were about seventy centimeters apart, which was certainly bigger than the tanuki in Japan. “They're round and pudgy with cute faces.”

“How do they taste?”

“Could be better. They don’t taste *bad*, but definitely not good enough for me to go out of my way to catch one. Deer and boar taste better, and they’re more plentiful.”

“So the tanuki are a last resort.”

“Yup.”

For lunch, I grilled the steaks of boar meat that I’d set aside. I seasoned them with brandy, salt, and pepper. As usual, Samya and Rike generously complimented my cooking, and the dish was highly reviewed by Diana as well.

In the afternoon, Rike and I went to the forge while Samya and Diana mended clothing. Our clothes didn’t have any large rips or tears, but there were a few fraying edges and smaller holes here and there. Apparently. I didn’t know the full details because clothing, in this case, included underwear, which meant that it wasn’t work I could help with. I entrusted the task to Samya and Diana, and I would focus on smithing instead.

As far as the division of the smithing work went, I would be forging elite models as usual, and Rike was forging entry-level models. Although Rike didn’t work as quickly as I did, we would still have enough stock to sell off with her working alone today and tomorrow. She’d already been forging entry-level models for the past couple of days, so we would certainly have enough for Camilo.

The workshop was soon filled with the crackling of flames and the clanging of hammers. The heated iron was like a red stage for the hammers to dance on, and throughout the performance, the plates of metal were transformed into bladed weapons, one by one.

The next day, Samya and Diana went out to gather fruits and vegetables, taking bentos with them. Rike and I would be spending another day in the forge.

“Do you ever wish you were spending the day outside, Rike?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Samya and Diana often journey into the forest, but you’re always stuck here with me.”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to go out once in a while...but the forge is a dwarf’s home. It’s where I belong, and I enjoy my work,” she said.

“I’m happy if you are.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Boss.”

“Ah...don’t mention it.”

We settled into work without another word. It was a productive day, and we might’ve even made more than our usual amount.

Tomorrow, we can take a break.

As I was thinking about plans for the next day, a loud knocking came from the outside door on the other side of the counter. Rike froze in surprise. I’d turned toward the door when our mysterious guest shouted, “Eizo! Are you home?”

The voice was familiar.

And it was just as loud as I remembered.

I gave as good as I got and yelled back, “I’m coming! Wait a minute!”

When I opened the door, I came face-to-face with a tall woman sporting red hair standing on the other side of the threshold. A knife scar ran across her face, but it did nothing to mar her attractive looks.

Our guest was a mercenary named Helen, but her rapid style of swordplay had earned her the nickname Lightning Blade.

Helen grinned broadly. “Long time no see!”

“No kidding.” I held the door open for her. “Come in, come in. Sit.”

“Thanks,” she said, barging in and plopping down onto a chair. She wasn’t noisy per se, but her big and showy movements left a loud impression.

I asked Rike to bring us some wine cut with water, along with some tea. Then, I got down to business. “What brings you here today? Is something the matter

with the swords I made you?”

“Not at all,” Helen replied. “At least, nothing major. I only came by for a tune-up. My next job is taking me out of the area to a faraway battlefield.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “Give them here.” Helen passed me her swords, and I turned them over this way and that, checking for any signs of warping or chips in the blade. “You use these blades regularly?”

“Hmmm. Let’s see. First, I trained with them for about a week. I’ve had a few small jobs taking down bandit groups. When I have the opportunity, I’ll practice with logs as my opponent. That’s about it.”

“All right.”

The blades were relatively undamaged and the metal hadn’t warped much, but they weren’t in perfect condition either.

How much power does Helen put behind her blows? She’s managed to cause slight damage to my custom model swords in such a short time... I suppose some things are hard to predict outside of actual battle.

Just then, Helen seemed to remember something. “Oh, that’s right.”

“What is it?” I braced myself for her news.

“I meant to tell you—these swords are extremely tough, just like I was hoping they’d be, and they’re sharp to boot. They’ve saved my life over and over again.”

Aha! So she’s used them to block attacks from other swords. I’m sure she’s been reckless in other ways too. That’s a good sign that my blades can withstand rough treatment. After all, they’re only made of steel.

“Mere words aren’t enough to express my gratitude, but I’ll say them anyway. Thank you, Eizo, for all that you’ve done for me.” She extended her right hand out toward me.

“It’s my job,” I stated awkwardly. “I accepted your commission, so I was duty-bound to complete it properly.” I took her hand. Her grip was tight to the point that it hurt, but the flush of pleasure I felt from her words won out over the pain.

Off to the side, Rike gave a sigh. “It wouldn’t kill you to be honest once in a while, Boss,” she said with a chuckle. I stubbornly ignored her.

“There are only a few chips in the blade, and the metal isn’t all that warped, either. I doubt you’ll have any problems in the next half year, but I’ll repair these spots anyway since you’re already here.”

“I’m counting on you,” Helen said.

We broke our handshake. “I’ll get started on it right away. Can you wait a while?”

“So,” Helen started hesitantly, “I was thinking...” I hadn’t known that she had a single timid bone in her body, but it looked like I’d been mistaken.

“What is it?” I pressed.

“Can I watch while you repair them?” she blurted out.

Is that all? “Sure, I don’t mind.”

I didn’t think she’d understand much, even if she were to watch, but I didn’t have any objections. I might’ve been more hesitant if fire was involved. The furnace could reach temperatures of over 1000°C and was not anything to be trifled with. But in this case, I was only doing a touch-up; the furnace wouldn’t be needed for sharpening the blades and repairing minor dents. In fact, reheating the swords at this stage would be counterproductive—the excessive heat could cause the metal to denature and would undo the effort I’d put in during the quenching and tempering stages.

“Score! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Helen cheered enthusiastically, slapping my back. She’d returned to her normal, exuberant self and was every inch a Joan of Arc character, a true heroine.

“Boss, can I observe as well?” Rike asked.

“Yeah, of course,” I replied without hesitation. It was beneficial for Rike to watch me, which was likely why she’d asked in the first place.

I got to work immediately. First, I wanted to repair any distortions in the metal. I laid one sword on the anvil and jumped straight in. There were only minor flaws, and my cheat abilities told me precisely where to hammer in order

to restore the metal to perfect uniformity. I put all my focus into the job, striking the blade carefully. The deliberate taps produced delicate *tings*, and the sounds were in stark contrast to the usual clanging that constantly filled the workshop.

Once I was done with the first sword of the pair, I handed it over to Helen for a look. “Give it a try and tell me what you think.”

“Will do.” Helen took the sword, walked over to an open space, and began to flow through a swordplay sequence. If she’d been anyone else, I would’ve worried about her causing damage to the room; it was a testament to her skill that I didn’t feel anxious about her movements at all.

“W-Wow. Just wow!” she exclaimed after trying out a few moves. “Eizo, you’re amazing! It feels exactly like it did when I first got it.”

“Right back at you. I’m impressed that you can feel a difference. It’s not like I changed much.” I meant every word of that sentiment. But it wasn’t flattery—it’s said that a skilled craftsman can tell the difference of a few micrometers by touch alone. Helen’s intuition as a swordsman was at an equivalent level.

“Good. So there are no problems?” I asked.

“None! It’s just like new!”

She returned the sword to me, and I looked over it again. The leather wrapping around the hilt seemed worn as well; I could tell that it had already been replaced several times. Like Helen had said, she’d been putting the sword through its paces.

“Shall I rewrap the hilt for you while I’m at it?” I offered.

“No, no need. I’m used to the grip. I wrap it in a way that best suits my hand.”

“All right, I’ll limit repairs to the blade then.”

“Thanks.”

I took up the second sword. The forge sunk into silence once again, but for the *tinking* of the hammer against the steel. Rike and Helen seemed to both be suppressing the sound of their breathing as if they were concerned that the noise would disrupt my work.

“Hey, Helen?” I asked, breaking the quiet atmosphere.

“Yeah?”

“Is it fun to watch me work?”

“Mmhmm. You really look the part of a craftsman with a hammer in your hand,” she said.

“I should hope so. After all, I am one.”

Well, insofar as blacksmithing can be considered a craft.

“I know that,” she said. “My pops was a craftsman, and I used to watch him work too.”

“Really? What did he do?”

“He was a farrier, but I left home a long time ago though.”

“Sounds like an interesting job,” I said simply.

A farrier, huh? Seems like work that truly requires technical expertise. Maybe I should give it a try too. Horseshoes and nails are within a blacksmith’s purview, right?

We chatted idly as I finished the repairs. When I was almost done, Helen brought up our earlier conversation. “Aren’t you gonna ask me why I left home, Eizo?” Her voice was barely louder than a whisper.

“Well, it’s not as though I’m not curious...but I have a policy: don’t pry into a woman’s past.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a bad experience before.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I replied. “Either way, I limit myself to benign questions these days. What kind of delicious food have you tried, and things of that nature,” I said. “Okay, I’m done.”

I passed the second sword to Helen for her to check the finish. She deemed that blade satisfactory as well. With both swords restored to good condition, I moved on to honing the edges. I concentrated my focus into my fingertips while I sharpened the first sword, and of course, I owed my hypersensitivity to the blessings of my cheats. I could feel Rike and Helen’s gazes on me, watching my

hands intently. I continued working until there wasn't a single nick to be seen along the blade.

"I'm done. You shouldn't have any problems with these in the near future."

I handed the sword to Helen once again. As she inspected it, we heard a clacking sound coming from the living area.

Hearing the noise, I glanced up. "When did it get so late?"

"What was that?" Helen asked.

"The wooden clappers alert us when the door to the living area is opened," I explained.

"What about the door here?"

"It's connected to another set of clappers in the living area."

"Clever."

"It's very convenient since we often gather in one-half of the cabin," I said. "I'm guessing that means the other two are home."

As I predicted, Samya and Diana soon came to join us in the workshop.

"We're home," Diana said as she walked through the door. "Oh, we have a guest?"

"Welcome home," I said. "And yes. She's a former customer of ours."

Helen tipped her head at Diana.

Samya had, of course, met Helen before. "If it isn't Helen! How've you been?" True to her warm and open nature, Samya greeted her like they were old friends.

"Happy as a clam," Helen replied.

"Helen...as in 'Lightning Blade Helen'?" Diana asked. "The one you mentioned before?"

Helen intercepted Diana's question for me. "Yeah, that's me."

Her hypothesis confirmed, Diana's eyes were now sparkling with interest.

"Helen," I interjected.

“Yeah? What is it, Eizo?”

“I won’t charge you for the repairs. Instead, I ask that you do me a favor—spar with the young lady over there?”

She quickly agreed. “Fine by me, if it’s all right with you.”

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “In the meantime, I’ll sharpen the other sword.”

“I’m fired up now! You can count on me!”

“Now, now, go easy on her,” I said mildly. I tossed Helen one of the wooden training swords that Diana and I usually used when we sparred. She caught the sword with an easy grace, then left the forge together with Diana, whose excitement was evident to everyone watching.

Is Helen really such a celebrity? The installed knowledge hadn’t come with any information about famous figures in this world.

I watched them go before picking up the sword I hadn’t yet completed and returning to my own work.

I’d finished the repairs on the second blade and had just begun to tidy up the workshop when Helen and Diana returned. As I’d expected, Diana looked like she’d suffered an overwhelming defeat. Helen wasn’t one to hold back in a fight.

“How did it go?” I asked, not directing the question to either of them in particular.

Helen answered me first. “Hmm, her movements are clean, but...how do I put this? She could benefit from having a few not-so-pretty moves in her repertoire.”

Diana’s shoulders heaved as she struggled to catch her breath. It didn’t look like she’d be able to answer me anytime soon.

Helen was a dual sword wielder, but she’d dominated Diana even with just one. She certainly lived up to her reputation as the Lightning Blade, and I couldn’t help but feel sympathy for Diana. I doubted that Diana had even gotten a chance to respond to Helen’s attacks; rather, it would likely have been

more accurate to say that Diana had been forced to react, pushed to the brink by strikes that seemed to come flying out of nowhere.

“You didn’t try anything dirty like going for her eyes, did you?” I asked.

“Course not. Who do you take me for?” Helen protested. “I used plenty of feints though.”

It hadn’t been an “anything goes” kind of fight, but I was sure Helen had had a few tricks up her sleeve. I wouldn’t put it past her to have faked a kick. In my sessions with Diana, I always fought by the book. It wasn’t hard for me to imagine that Diana (who fought on the unspoken assumption that a sword was the only weapon one used in a duel), hadn’t been prepared for Helen’s attacks.

On the contrary, Diana might be so used to straightforward swordplay that she hadn’t even caught onto some of Helen’s feints. Diana had *just* started using feints herself when sparring with me, but needless to say, her repertoire was no match for a veteran of the battlefield, especially a mercenary famous enough to have earned a nickname.

“This young lady still fights better than some of the chumps I’ve met in the royal palace,” Helen said. “You trained her, Eizo?”

“Yeah, how’d you know? She learned her fundamentals elsewhere, but I’ve been sparring with her since she moved here.”

“I knew I was right! The way she feints reminds me of your fighting style. The resemblance was so strong, actually, that I knew just how to intercept them.”

Helen had remembered my habits from the one time we’d faced off. Her skills were honestly good enough to be cheats. Of course, on the battlefield, one had no choice but to deal with unexpected threats in real time. A split moment’s hesitation could spell doom. I was sure Helen’s experience in battle had honed her speed and instincts.

“Eizo, you lasted fifteen whole minutes against Helen?” Diana asked, finally catching her breath.

“Something like that. She was dual-wielding when I fought her though.”

Diana slumped in disappointment. “I’ve gained a whole new appreciation for

the saying ‘There will always be someone better.’”

Rike nodded along to Diana’s words and patted her back in consolation. A shared understanding passed between the two of them.

Helen then turned her sights toward me. “Your turn, Eizo! You and me, one on one!” She seemed high on adrenaline from sparring with Diana.

“No way,” I protested. “Why should I?”

“Why not?!”

“I’m a blacksmith...no match for an active mercenary.”

“You’ll be fine. Come on.”

“Not a chance,” I said with finality. “Instead of that, I’d like to ask—what are you planning to do tonight? It’s already late. You’re welcome to stay here, of course.”

“It’s gotten dark, huh?”

“We’re a long way away from the city, and I wouldn’t feel right letting you go back through the forest when it’s pitch black. Stay the night.”

We’d just finished constructing Diana’s room, so the guest room was available again. It was perfect timing. The three women also nodded their agreement to my plan. Helen may have been the strongest person in the area—not an exaggeration—but I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I were to turn a woman out in the dark.

“I’ll take you up on that,” Helen said.

“The four of us will be heading into the city tomorrow too, so we’ll see you back,” I added.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s not as if we’re going out of our way or anything.”

We would be using up two extra portions of food for Helen’s dinner tonight and breakfast tomorrow, but it was hardly anything to concern ourselves over.

Now then, shall I put a little extra effort into cooking?

Our dinner tonight rivaled the lavishness of the meal I had prepared when I'd come back from the capital. I was generous with the meat portions and everyone complimented the dish. Helen even said, "The meat tastes extra delicious because of the pepper you used." Her praise really stuck with me.

She has enough money to buy pepper herself if she wanted to.

While we ate, Helen told us about the different cities she'd been to. Her job as a mercenary took her far and wide, and she knew places that were off the map too. Her stories were fascinating to listen to.

At one point, drawn into one of her tales, I uttered without thinking, "What was that about a brothel?" Everyone started needling me, so I quickly backpedaled. "No! Who's interested? Not me! But...is what you said true?"

###

The next morning, I went to the lake and retrieved water. Helen also joined us for our morning chores. With the five of us working together, the basin we used for washing suddenly felt quite small. While I prepared breakfast, Helen joined the other three to do laundry. She seemed to enjoy herself.

After we ate, we packed for the day's journey and departed without any delay. Rike and I were on cart duty as usual. The other three kept watch. With just one extra pair of eyes, I felt much more at ease. As we hiked through the forest, Helen told tales of the times she'd had to guard merchant wagons in her job as a mercenary.

Once we were out of the trees, the landscape opened up. The sky above us was like a giant blue canvas that was splashed in places with white paint, and a green carpet extended out toward the horizon. The scenery was as beautiful as always, however, the terrain's openness was a double-edged sword; we could see far out into the distance, but we would also be visible to anyone else (like bandits) who wished to try their luck.

Fortunately, we learned from Helen that the leader of the bandits had been deposed of a while back. I felt a wave of relief wash over me at the news. Without a leader, the crooks and bandits were unlikely to be a big threat, but

there could still be small fry lurking around that the guards hadn't yet cleaned up.

We kept only minimal watch as we continued onward, though we didn't drop our guard completely. Our group would've made for a tempting target since I was the only man traveling with four women, and we were dragging along goods for sale.

Nevertheless, we arrived at the capital without encountering any trouble. This was partially due to the specific women I was traveling with since they all projected strength. However, the primary reason we went by unmolested was probably due to the diligence of the city guards.

The guard on duty at the entrance gate today was the same one who'd checked Diana last week. When he caught sight of us, I saw him smirk before quickly schooling his expression into a mask of professional disinterest.

"I see you've added another member to your, *ahem*, harem...and not just any member either. Do my eyes deceive me, or is that the infamous Lightning Blade?"

"Yes, she's an acquaintance," I responded politely.

Of course, she was Camilo's acquaintance originally. She seemed to know Marius as well, though how she became friends with the third son of a count was a mystery to me.

"Who are you really?" the guard asked me.

"I'm just your run-of-the-mill blacksmith."

"The Lightning Blade isn't one to associate with just any blacksmith," he replied. "Well, I guess I won't pry any further. Do me a favor and try not to cause a scene."

"We wouldn't dream of it."

With our goodbyes said, we entered the city. Here, the four of us parted ways from Helen.

"I don't have any business with Camilo, so I'll leave you here," she said. "But I'll visit again when I'm back so you can check on the condition of the swords. I'll

make sure to bring you gifts from my travels too! In the meantime, take care of yourselves!” And with those parting words, Helen headed off in the direction of the Open Market.

A sentiment came to me unbidden—all I wanted was for her to come back safe and show up at our doorstep again, swords in hand. Forget gifts...that would be the greatest present of all.

After we split off from Helen, we went straight to Camilo’s store. Other than the addition of one new weapon to our product lineup, today’s visit was no different than usual. We left the cargo in the storehouse, greeted the workers there, and quickly made our way to the second-floor conference room. Before long, Camilo and the head clerk came to meet us.

“How’s business?” I asked as they walked in.

“Can’t complain,” Camilo replied. “Now that I’m known as an official supplier of the Eimoors, people are starting to put more trust in my business, so sales have been picking up.”

“That’s great news.” I don’t know how the partnership was working for Marius, but the outcome couldn’t have been better for Camilo.

“I’m assuming you brought the usual wares with you today?”

“The usual plus a new product. Today, I brought five halberds for you.”

“Halberds, you say? What for?” Camilo asked.

“To arm the city guards actually. I was hoping for your help arranging a sale with our dear Lord Eimoor.”

“I see.”

“Do you think they will sell?”

“I don’t see why not. Besides, there are always other buyers if it doesn’t work out. I’m happy to take them for you.”

“Thanks. That’d be a great help,” I replied. That closed up our business negotiations.

Camilo seemed to agree that Marius would buy the halberds. Even if he didn't, I wouldn't mind if they were sold to a different buyer.

"Now then, I have another matter to discuss with you," Camilo began, lowering his voice. "You said you were interested in rare minerals, did you not?"

"Yes. Have you procured any?"

"Nothing physical, but I have info that may interest you. I heard it straight from the mouth of our favorite lord himself. A supply of appoitakara has made its way from the north to the capital. I can obtain a portion for you if you're interested."

My installed knowledge had come with an overview of appoitakara. According to the lore, appoitakara was this world's equivalent to *hihirokane*, which was a legendary metal, known in Japan to gleam scarlet like the color of burning flames. Appoitakara was harder than iron and was mined in the north. Once it was refined, the metal gave off a blue luster. It was apparently softer than *hihirokane*, but no less rare.

"Count me interested. Can I leave the matter in your hands?"

"Of course. My apologies if I'm too late though."

"I'm already impressed that you found out the location," I replied. "What'll it cost me?"

"Three gold coins."

"That's not cheap." I had enough to afford it if I dipped into the gold that Helen had paid me for her commission as well as the reward I'd received for my role in the Eimoor family dispute. However, it wasn't an amount a normal blacksmith could easily drop.

"I could discount it to two coins for you if you do me a favor," Camilo offered.

"Not anything too troublesome, I hope."

"Nothing like that," he said. "You see, I've gotten my hands on a supply of mithril—this has no connection to the count—and I've received a commission for a mithril rapier."

I grasped his meaning immediately. "Aaah, the discount is a substitute for the

fee to smith the rapier.”

“Yes, precisely.”

Since I wouldn’t have to pay anything for the cost of the materials, the gold coin would purely be payment for the forging itself. Not bad at all. As a bonus, I’d get the chance to play around with mithril.

“Can I put our forge’s insignia on the rapier?” I asked. “I’ll make it inconspicuous.”

“Sure, you’re free to do as you like.”

“Well then, I’ll take on this commission.”

“Looks like we have a deal.”

Camilo looked over at the head clerk, who caught his signal, nodded, and left the room. While our cart was loaded with the supplies, I chatted with Camilo about the state of affairs in the capital and news he’d heard about other cities. Once everything was ready, we headed back downstairs and retrieved our cart from the storeroom.

The guards at the city fence had rotated while we’d taken care of business. As we left through the gate, the four of us exchanged curt greetings with the guard on duty and then set off on the road back home.

The journey home was more nerve-racking than the journey into the city had been. This time, we had a supply of mithril stashed away in our cargo. Four members made a sizable group, and both Samya and Diana were on guard duty. Still, it was impossible to relax knowing that we were carrying such a valuable commodity. There were surely bandits who were smart enough to realize that an object’s size had no correlation to its value, ones who sought to get rich quick off of rarities. I found myself more alert than usual.

Occasionally, I’d hear rustling in the thickets along the side of the road, but Samya reassured me every time that it was only the wind or a stray critter. Once we’d made it safely to the forest, I relaxed a fraction. I felt more at ease among the trees, where the biggest threats were bears, rather than on the road where we could be ambushed by bandits.

Our hike through the forest was uneventful as well. Soon, we emerged into the clearing where our cabin stood.

Home sweet home.

As usual, we divided up the cargo duty. Samya and Diana brought the food and perishables into the kitchen. Rike and I handled the ore, charcoal, and mithril.

The mithril gleamed silver in the light of the forge, but appearance-wise, it looked similar to other metals. Once it was refined, it would take on an almost luminant quality, but the supply we received from Camilo was raw ore.

For now, I steered my thoughts away from the metal and focused on storing everything away.

The next day, I couldn't help but be preoccupied with thoughts of the mithril, but replenishing our stock of plate steel took precedence. We split the work among the four of us, and by the end of the day, we had a full stock of metal plates once again.

###

On our second day back from the city, I finally had the chance to work with the mithril. An opportunity like this didn't come around every day, so Rike and the others would be observing and learning. Rike would be helping out occasionally as well.

To start, I heated the firebed, grabbed the mithril with the tongs, and slid it into the fire. The heat of the flame slowly coaxed the temperature of the metal higher and higher, until it was nearly at the forging temperature of iron. A normal bar of silver would've already started melting, but mithril wasn't normal silver—it became malleable at almost the same temperature as steel.

Once I judged it to be hot enough, I transferred the metal to the anvil and struck it once, hard, with my hammer. The sound of the mithril was clear and resonant; the pure tone reminded me more of glass than iron or any of its alloys.

When I worked with steel, the metal always bent readily under the hammer. In comparison, my heavy blow had barely left a dent in the mithril. It was

sturdier than I'd anticipated.

"This is going to be tricky," I muttered.

"Even for you and your talents with the hammer, Boss?" Rike asked.



“Yeah. Have a look at the metal—it’s more or less unchanged where I hammered it. I should’ve charged Camilo more for my time,” I grumbled, prompting a round of snickering from the others.

I struck the mithril four, five more times, covering the sound of their laughter. In just a few hits, the temperature of the metal had already dropped past the point at which it was workable. I transferred it back into the firebed.

“I’ve met my match,” I declared. “This is going to be an uphill battle.”

“Mithril has that reputation,” Rike said. “A normal blacksmith wouldn’t be able to work with it at all.”

“That’s true.”

Up until now, I’d only worked with steel, which I could shape to my will with my hammer. Since coming to this world, this was the first time I’d been confronted with a material I couldn’t easily handle. It was going to be tough...but this challenge made my coming here feel all the more meaningful. I felt that it was worth having requested the cheats from the Watchdog, just so I could forge a life for myself as a blacksmith.

I removed the mithril from the fire and began to strike it once more.

My hammer collided with the mithril, stretching it longer, centimeter by centimeter. The work took me two, maybe three times as long as when I worked with steel. However, there were upsides to working with mithril. Compared to steel, the atomic composition of mithril was more pure; the deformities and contortions that appeared during steelwork were nowhere to be seen. Thank god. Instead of worrying about the metal’s uniformity, I could give my full attention to hammering it out to the length I wanted. The low density of mithril was another blessing, considering how often I had to move it back and forth between the furnace and the anvil.

No one could deny mithril’s superiority as a material, but the work was also more nerve-racking than usual. I couldn’t help but feel like I would ruin the metal if I struck the wrong spot even once. I dialed my cheats all the way up as I hammered the metal into a long and thin rhombus, putting in extra care to refine the end into a sharp point. One mistake could spell disaster. The level of

concentration required was far above what I was used to.

This wasn't a project that could be rushed, and though the work ticked along, it wasn't at all tedious. The pure tones produced by the mithril were enthralling and made the process more enjoyable.

I wasn't the only one who appreciated the metal's surprising musicality. Amid my hammering, Samya commented, "What a stunning sound."

"It almost sounds like an instrument, doesn't it?" added Rike.

"I think it's lovely too," Diana said.

Seeing their obvious pleasure, I received a fresh burst of motivation. Their words of appreciation fueled my movements, so I started working faster. The metal grew longer and thinner at a pace that was still slow, but quicker than before.

We took a short lunch break, but I still had a long way until the finish line, so I continued smithing well into the afternoon.

Eventually, I asked the other three, "Aren't you all bored?"

"What is there to be bored by?" Samya asked. "Just watching you is plenty fun for me."

Rike agreed. "I think so too. It's a valuable learning experience for me. I've never seen anyone work with mithril before, not even back in my family's workshop."

"Plus, the mithril makes a beautiful sound when you hit it. It's mesmerizing watching the metal grow longer and longer under your hammer," said Diana.

"Good to hear," I replied as I brought the hammer up for another swing.

Over the course of the day, I turned the mithril into a meter-long rapier that was a mere 2.5 centimeters across at its widest point. The rhombus-shaped blade tapered on one end into a delicately pointed tip, which I'd hammered out as sharp as I could; on the opposite end was a slim cylinder that would become the rapier's grip.

For this project, I skipped the quenching and tempering and moved straight to

sharpening. The former two stages were necessary when working with steel, but not with mithril since it was fundamentally a more durable metal and thus impervious to change. The metals I was familiar with from Earth were no match for the (literal) otherworldly metals that were native to this world.

Given the superior quality of mithril, it would've been worth processing the metal in bulk. Of course, this assumed that one had the right equipment and sufficient skills. The limited supply of the metal was one problem, but heating and shaping it was also exhausting. Bulk production might've been possible for a machine, but that sort of advanced technology hadn't yet been invented in this world. The day when mithril weapons became a common commodity was a long way away.

I'd been worried about whether my normal whetstone would be sufficient to sharpen the mithril, but using it, combined with my cheats, I managed to make things work. However, I could tell by the sensation of the rapier sliding across the whetstone that if the blade wasn't angled exactly right, it would be ruined.

I didn't break my focus for even a moment. The sword sang as I slid it back and forth, entertaining my audience. I kept my movements languid, guiding the blade in a slow waltz with whisper-soft steps.

The process of honing the rapier's edge took a long time, but I finished before the day was out.

"I'm finally done with the sword body."

"Is it ready to be wielded?" Diana asked right away, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"I still have to wrap the grip in leather and install a cross guard, but you can test it out if you promise to be careful."

"Can I?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, but why don't you take it outside?" I suggested. "It'll be dangerous in here if you accidentally lose your grip."

"All right," she agreed. I handed her the rapier. "It's so light!"

"It is, isn't it? I wouldn't say it's light as a feather per se, but it feels more like

a wooden staff than a metal sword.”

“Yes. Rapid thrusts will be no problem with this rapier.”

“I agree. Now let’s go out and put it to the test.”

We piled out the door. All of our eyes sparkled in the exact same way. Needless to say, this was my first time seeing mithril in all my life, so I could barely contain my enthusiasm.

Diana started with a simple routine to test the blade’s moveset. She flicked the rapier up and down, left and right, and tested out a series of quick thrusts. Because of the rapier’s light weight, Diana’s movements were nimble and sharp, but there seemed to be no danger of losing her grip. When compared with a shortsword, the rapier’s superior speed became immediately evident, and that difference was clear in Diana’s performance. She looked as if she was dancing. Samya and Rike watched with rapt attention.

Rapiers were weapons used for slicing as well as piercing, though they couldn’t execute a brutal chop like a greatsword could. Diana started to intersperse clean slices among the thrusts she’d been trying out before. Her movements looked faster than they normally did when we sparred.

“You’re quicker than usual,” I noted. “I wonder if it’s because of how light the rapier is.”

“To be honest, I was thinking that too,” Diana replied. “Somehow, it feels as if my whole body is more buoyant. Perhaps it’s because the rapier takes less energy to wield.”

“That makes sense.”

Having a light and nimble weapon was truly ideal. Well, there were some, like hammers, which depended on weight to produce power, but weapons made for stabbing and slicing didn’t need to be heavy.

“Next, let’s put you in front of an enemy,” I said. The “enemy” was no more than a thick plank of wood that I stood on its side.

“Should I try to pierce through it?” Diana asked.

“Yeah. It’s not very stable though, so be careful.”

“Got it.”

Diana held the rapier out, tip pointing toward the enemy stand-in. She inhaled deeply and slowly breathed it out. Our surroundings were quiet but for the whisper of the wind. Time slowed and stretched. What must’ve been only a few seconds felt like minutes.

Suddenly, Diana sprang forward, yelling out with zeal as she thrust the sword through the wood with all of her power. The rapier did not fail to pierce its target, and its tip slid silently into the wood. From the sidelines, it looked as if the wood had absorbed the rapier into its very composition.

Diana withdrew the blade as quickly as she had thrust it in, leaving behind a hole in the shape of the rapier’s tip. Judging from that mark alone, it didn’t seem as if anything extraordinary had happened. The wood only appeared as if it had been stabbed by something, and it was our job as the onlookers to tell the true story of what we’d just witnessed.

“That was...unbelievable,” Diana said in amazement. “I hardly felt any sensation at all.”

“Did it feel like you were stabbing the air?” I asked.

“Pretty much. There was barely any difference.”

“Good. Then this should suffice. Can I see it?”

Diana handed me the rapier and I inspected its tip. The thrust hadn’t bent or chipped it, and the blade remained unblemished. I concluded that I could leave the sword’s blade as it was.

Then, I had another idea. I handed the rapier back to Diana and went into the workshop to grab a plate of metal and a length of rope. When I returned to where everyone was waiting, I tied the metal to the wooden plank.

“All right. Can you try to pierce through this?” I asked Diana.

She nodded. “Sure, no problem.”

She readied her stance once again. This time, she stayed loose and relaxed as she thrust toward the metal and wood rig. There was a quiet *shnick* as the

rapier pierced the metal plate, and the sound echoed through the silent clearing. When Diana removed the blade, I saw that a conical hole had been punctured clean through the metal plate. I inspected the blade again to make sure it was still free of nicks and deformities—the mithril was perfectly unmarred.

“Could I have accidentally made something that’s batshit insane?” I mused out loud.

The other three stared at me wide-eyed and nodded.

Though I’d successfully completed the mithril rapier, I found myself hesitating.

Can I really unleash a blade of this caliber on the world? But...it’s not as if one rapier could alter the course of the world...could it?

No matter how good this sword was, it wouldn’t be able to ensure the safety of its wielder against a hundred enemies, not even if the opponents were only using mass-produced shortswords.

However, if the outcome of the battle wasn’t decided by one person’s strength, but say, a trick of the environment, then my rapier alone might be sufficient to turn defeat into victory. For example, if the opposing army blocked off a strategic road with a boulder, my rapier could be used to slice through the rock—should its wielder think to do so—and literally clear a path to victory. It wasn’t out of the question.

Can I really hand over this weapon to someone else?

In the case of Helen’s commission, I had forged her shortswords out of steel. The Eimoor family sword was made for ceremonial use rather than for the battlefield. However, this rapier was destined for the front lines. I could hardly imagine it languishing in storage somewhere.

Then, there was the matter of my general principles. Supposing I decided to complete this job...was I going to have to agonize over this same dilemma for every other commission? I should make a clear decision right now, once and for all.

“Hey, everyone,” I called.

They all responded immediately, their words mingling together:

“What’s up?”

“What’s on your mind, Boss?”

“What is it, Eizo?”

“Do you think I should turn this rapier out into the world? If misused, it could become a source of misery and pain. A blade that won’t bend or break... A blade that is sharp enough to cut through metal and slice through boulders... To be honest, I’m scared,” I finally admitted. “I’m afraid of what’ll happen if I yield this rapier to someone else. I’m scared I’ll end up bearing the burden of an unthinkable disaster. One awful scenario after another keeps popping into my head, and they just won’t stop coming.”

I poured my heart out to my family. On the outside, I was a strong and tough man with over forty years of experience, but this burden was too much for me to bear alone.

The three of them stared at me fixedly. What if one of them decided to abandon me here and leave this cabin forever? In that case, there would be nothing I could do. I would’ve reached the limit of my abilities.

A thick silence fell over the glade, unbroken, once again, but for the rush of the wind.

The next sound that reached my ears was a muffled giggle. I looked up. A gentle smile had broken over Diana’s face. “So you’re human after all, Eizo. Considering your skills, I thought you were immune to such mortal dilemmas.”

“Boss, I thought the same as Diana. To me, your presence is larger than life. I didn’t think you’d worry over problems like this,” Rike said with a smile. “I was told that the wielder carries responsibility for a sword’s actions, not the creator. Most blacksmiths are taught the same. I understand why this problem may worry you, though. Your swords are more powerful than most.”

“Rike’s right!” Samya exclaimed. “Whether a sword is used to protect one’s own country or destroy someone else’s is up to the person who uses it. You’re not responsible for the outcome at all. You’re too honest for your own good,

Eizo... And if the weight is too heavy for you alone, then we'll help you carry it. We're your family, after all."

She heartily slapped my shoulder. Mysteriously, the pain of her slap healed me more than it hurt.

"You're right. All of you are right. Thank you." I bowed deeply toward the three women and quietly wiped my eyes. I felt a pair of arms encircle my head and shoulders. Someone else hugged me around my legs. The last person draped themselves over my back.

All four members of our little family came together in a tightly entwined ball for one peaceful moment.

I straightened back up from my bow and said, "I can do this!" before using both hands to give my cheeks a hearty slap.

I won't stray from my path anymore. My purpose in this world is to craft whatever I want and to send those items into the world without hesitation. And what I want is for my blades to be used to help people.

"Determination is a good look on you, Eizo," Samya said.

"Only because I'm so handsome, right?" I joked.

"Yup!" Rike and Diana chorused.

The four of us broke into smiles and laughter.

We're going to be all right. Together, as a family, we can go anywhere.

"Enough worrying. Let's go eat!" I declared.

"Score!" Samya yelled. "Bring out the food!"

Immediately, Rike snapped back, "Samya! What did I say about watching your manners?"

Samya paid no attention to the rebuke and skipped back toward the cabin. Diana had a fond smile on her face as she watched the others' antics.

At last, my peaceful days had returned. The clouds swirling around my mind had disappeared. In a good mood once more, I hurried after my family into our

home.

###

The next day, I worked on the quillon (crossbar) and the knuckle guard of the rapier. Rike had her hands full forging entry-level models, so she wouldn't be observing.

For the guard, I decided on an intricate series of overlapping arcs that would be, overall, shaped like a spherical cage. I also switched to steel instead of mithril. Each individual bar of the cage would be extremely slender, which would make it prohibitively difficult to construct out of mithril.

Another benefit to using steel was its ubiquity. After all, even a metal as strong as mithril would deform if it were put under too much stress, and the owner of this rapier could separately commission an artisan to repair or replace the steel guard. It'd be expensive but feasible. I could rest assured that my work would be in good hands even after it left my possession.

Before I began to craft the knuckle guard, I first carved our forge's insignia, the fat sitting cat, into the hilt where it would be obscured by the guard. I retempered and whetted the chisel to give it a better chance against the mithril. I had to put a fair amount of power behind every stroke of the design, but the chisel did hold up.

Then I got to work on the knuckle guard. I heated a bar of metal and shaped it into a long, thin rod. Since I'd worked all day with mithril yesterday, shaping the steel was a breeze in comparison. Of course, the cheats helped too. I was able to finish the rod in what felt like the blink of an eye.

Next, I cut the rod into small pieces. I twisted the pieces into J and S shapes and linked them together to form a sphere. This cage-shaped guard would extend down from the base of the blade, covering the grip to protect the hand of its wielder. As I worked, I imagined the spherical jungle gyms in the playgrounds back on Earth. They'd been popular when I was a kid, but sadly, they had largely disappeared by the time I'd left that world.

Once I'd finished that, next up was the quillon. I forged another rod as slim as the bars that made up the guard. Then, I shaped the ends of the rod into small spheres. Overall, the quillon looked like a miniature, thin barbell. I welded the

quillon to the knuckle guard to finish it off.

Before I welded the guard onto the hilt of the sword, I first wrapped the hilt in leather. I also affixed a pommel to the grip. That work would've been a pain to do after the guard was in place.

Once I installed the guard, the rapier was complete, and I stepped back to survey the results of my work. It was nothing less than exquisite, a blade I could take pride in no matter what it was destined for.

I no longer had even a shadow of a doubt as to whether I should send my work out into the world, and that doubt was not welcome back either.

Chapter 7: A New Commission

The rapier was now complete, so the next day, I decided to make a scabbard. Camilo hadn't relayed any specific requests for the scabbard, so I was just going to rely on my instincts. If the client didn't like the final result, I could always remake it to their specifications. Once again, I was going to be working alone today; Rike and the others were continuing to forge entry-level models.

Before I settled down to work, I went out to our wooden plank storage, selected two of the right size, and brought them back into the forge. The fundamental process of making a scabbard for a rapier was no different from any other sword.

Each plank would form one-half of the scabbard. I carved out a hollow where the rapier would rest and then glued the two sides together. I also carved the outside to match the shape of the blade.

Amusingly, I recalled that the opening of a scabbard for a Japanese sword was literally called the koi fish's mouth because of its gaping shape. For this scabbard, I decided to use steel to reinforce both the tip and the opening. With these steel additions, the scabbard looked more sturdy than when it had been just plain wood. If I had wanted to make the scabbard even more elaborate, I could've chiseled a design into its surface, or covered it with the leather from a deer's hide. However, I decided to leave it as it was.

Scabbards never took long to make, but I finished the one for the rapier more quickly than usual since it was only provisional. With the time left in the day, I selected a portion of the shortswords and longswords that the other three were making, choosing ones that had just been unmolded. I would be turning them into elite models.

The swords—both the ones that Samya had cast and the ones Diana had cast—were clearly better made than they had been in the past. Thanks to the two women's efforts, the swords would be easier for me to finish up. They were good, not just for entry-level models, but for elite models too.

Perhaps it was because I'd gotten used to the level of intense focus I'd had to maintain in order to forge the rapier, but I found myself concentrating more without realizing it. The imperfections in the metal seemed to melt away under my hammer, and at this rate, I'd turn everything into custom models by accident.

I was no longer tortured by the question of whether it was conscionable for me to make the weapons I wanted and yield them to a third party, but that was different than making exclusively custom models. To begin with, making everything a custom model didn't make any practical sense—they were sold for a gold coin at least (though the price was subject to my whims), a price that was prohibitively expensive for most. Elite models were by far the best candidate for our forge's flagship product, as they struck the perfect balance between quality and affordability.

And so, I restrained myself as I worked. As I'd predicted, since I had started with a high-quality cast, I was able to quickly complete the elite sword. Maybe it was time to let Diana try her hand at hammering as well.

By the end of the day, we'd produced a satisfactory number of swords. Tomorrow, we could move on to knives. At the pace we were working, we would have plenty of stock for Camilo by tomorrow, and we might even be able to take time off on the day after tomorrow.

It had been a while since our previous vacation. The mess over in the capital had happened right after our last break, and we hadn't gotten a day of rest since then. Plus, the mithril rapier had been a challenge to make, so I was ready for a break.

During dinner, I proposed to the others that we take a day off. The plan was received with fanfare and passed unanimously.

It became official—the day after tomorrow would be a vacation day!

###

The next day (the one before our off day), Samya and Diana left together to hunt. Diana was no longer coming back from these trips exhausted, unlike when she'd first started living with us. Her stamina must have increased from running around in the forest and keeping pace with Samya. I noticed the difference in

our daily sparring sessions too; our matches lasted a little longer every day, with Diana pushing to counter more and more of my attacks.

I was pretty confident, but not certain, that with Diana's current level of stamina, she could win against an average soldier by outlasting them and wearing them out bit by bit. She was well on track to becoming the strongest fighter in the region.

With the other women out hunting, Rike and I were spending the day in the forge working on knives. Rike was making entry-levels, and I was making elite models. By now, the work was so routine that we could do it in our sleep. We worked quickly and efficiently, churning knives out one after another.

Has Rike gotten faster or am I imagining it? I think I'm still in the lead, but she could give me a run for my money if we were to compete. Everyone's leveling up slowly but surely.

We worked in silence. By the end of the day, we had surpassed our weekly quota of knives, so we were able to close the workshop before dusk. As we were cleaning up, the clappers on the door alerted us that Samya and Diana had returned.

"Perfect timing," I said to Rike.

"It really is. I'll clean up this area, Boss."

"Thanks."

Between the two of us, the room was tidied up in a flash. We then returned to the living room where Samya and Diana were setting down their bows and other belongings.

"Welcome home," I called out. "How did it go?"

"We're home," Samya answered for both of them. "We took down a humongous deer today."

"Can't wait to see it tomorrow when we go to bring it home."

Samya puffed out her chest and her face beamed with pride. "You're in for a surprise! Look forward to it."

In contrast to Samya's excitement, Diana looked dazed, almost as if there was

a soft light shining directly on her face.

“Hey, Samya... What’s going on with Diana?” I asked.

“Oh, you see,” Samya started, shaking her head disapprovingly, “a mother wolf and her pup came up to us while we were gutting the deer. Diana took one look at the pup and fell in love with how cute it was. She’s been like this ever since.”

“I understand perfectly.” I pictured a baby wolf wagging its tail like a puppy. It was easy to see how Diana had fallen under the pup’s spell without any resistance. “What happened to the two wolves?”

“They snatched up the deer’s intestines and ran off somewhere. They probably knew we were hunting and had been waiting the whole time for their chance to scavenge,” Samya explained. “But don’t worry. We buried the heart of the deer properly.”

The forest wolves were extraordinarily intelligent. If Diana found out that we could train one to live with us by feeding it regularly, she might be tempted to give it a try. But that was one front I wouldn’t compromise on—it was one thing if we found an orphaned pup to raise, but we couldn’t possibly separate one from its parents. When I met Samya’s eyes, I could tell that we’d come to the same conclusion. Both of us nodded firmly in unison.

###

All throughout dinner, Diana raved about how adorable the wolf pup had been.

Unfortunately, she was still preoccupied the next day too.

We started the morning by completing our chores. Then, we headed out to the lake together so that we could retrieve the carcass of the deer. Diana was restless during the entire trek to the lake. I bet she was checking to see if the pup was around.

Don’t get me wrong, I sympathized with her feelings. Back in my previous world, I’d occasionally run into cats with their kittens in tow. Whenever I’d pass the area again in the days after the encounter, I’d always be hyper-alert, hoping against hope that I’d see the cats again. However, reunions had been rare. I’d

never seemed to find the cats again, no matter how hard I'd looked.

And so, in the end, we arrived at the shore of the lake without seeing hide nor hair of the wolves. I could tell by looking at Diana's eyes that she was disappointed, but what didn't kill you made you stronger.

As for the deer... It was as large as the enormous boar that Samya and Diana had killed.

It must be at least two meters tall!

"Hunting this deer must've been quite the challenge," I said.

"Thanks to the arrowheads you made, along with a bit of luck, we were able to bring it down quickly, and it died almost instantly after I shot it," Samya said. "I must've hit a vulnerable place."

"Amazing."

"I never could've taken it down so quickly with a normal arrow. We would've been chasing it until well after sunset."

In response to Samya's roundabout compliment, I simply said, "Thanks."

I asked Rike to cut down a larger tree while the rest of us dragged the body of the deer to shore. At first, it was easy; we were aided by the buoyancy of the water. But as the body neared dry land, it became heavier and heavier.

Samya, Diana, and I were far stronger than average humans, so the weight was not unmanageable. Pulling a deer this size surely would've taken more than two people, assuming an average person's strength.

Between the leftover boar meat and this new venison, we'd have more meat around than we knew what to do with.

With the wood that Rike had chopped, we made a pallet and loaded the deer onto it, then set off for home. The pallet was larger than usual to accommodate the sheer size of the animal, and we dragged it all together. Between the weight of the pallet and the weight of the deer, the trip was both more exhausting and longer than usual.

Back at the cabin, we strung up the body, which was no easy feat. But after that, the butchering was simple. As always, our custom model knives were a big

help when it came to carving, but more than anything, we'd simply grown accustomed to the work. After all, we had to butcher an animal almost every week. I set a portion of the fresh venison aside for our daily meals. This time, Samya also saved some of the deer's tendons so that she could use them to restring her bow later.

There was only so much meat we could cure with salt, so we ended up having to dry more than usual. In the end, there was meat hanging from every possible surface and free spot in the workshop, making the room look more like a butcher's shop than a forge.

Looks like that storehouse—smokehouse combo building would be useful to build after all.

For lunch, we had sautéed venison. Since we were taking the rest of the day off, I served wine (and brandy for Rike) with the meal. Having a drink with lunch was common in this world, although it was rare to find a person who drank wine as if it was water. The taste of a midday drink was delicious no matter which world I was in, and today, we enjoyed the fresh meat and liquor together.

In the afternoon, we all broke off to do whatever each of us was most interested in. Samya repaired her bow, Rike practiced forging pieces with delicate detail work, and Diana practiced her swordsmanship.

I wanted to work on our budding courtyard. Someday, I hoped to make it a full-fledged flower bed or vegetable garden, but for now, it was still a bare plot of dirt. We'd been neglecting its care, so it had become overgrown with weeds. The soil was still soft to some degree, but I would definitely have to replot the field.

I fetched a hoe from the workshop and began to plow the soil. It was much easier than it had been the first time, even without the support of the others. In some respects, the work resembled what I normally did as a blacksmith, but since I wasn't making a product to sell, it didn't seem like work.

It feels good to move my body too. I should cultivate the field more often.

I finished plowing the plot by myself. When I was done, the dirt looked soft and fresh again. If I wanted to take this even more seriously, I could sieve the soil, but I wasn't sure how much effort I should dedicate to the field. At the very

least, I would try and make sure that weeds didn't start growing again.

For dinner, I stewed the venison in wine. Since we would be restocking the wine tomorrow, I could afford to be liberal with it. Plus, it was important to treat ourselves once in a while. We were on vacation, after all. Between the delicious food and the lively conversation, everyone managed to recharge their batteries so that we could face the new day with vigor.

###

The next day, we headed into the city to see Camilo and drop off the blades we'd made. Everyone helped to load up the cart, and then we set off into the forest. I'd made sure to prepare an extra two gold coins for today.

We passed the occasional deer or other animals, but nothing dangerous. Diana was restless, her head swiveling every which way as she walked. She was probably still on the lookout for that wolf pup.

We proceeded with caution on the road into the city, but as usual, the journey was peaceful and quiet. I occasionally checked with Samya and Diana to see if they'd sensed anything, but they said no every time. Before long, we arrived at the border of the city.

The guard on duty was the one we had seen the last time we'd left the city.

I wonder what happened to Marius's friend... He's also a customer of ours, so he's more than a stranger. I hope he hasn't run into any trouble the way Marius did.

I nodded to the guard as we entered through the fence.

We made our way to Camilo's store, and there was only one deviation from our routine: instead of leaving all our goods in the storage area, I brought one piece with me directly to the conference room. It was the mithril rapier of course. There was no way I could simply leave it lying around in the cart.

As usual, we waited in the conference room for Camilo and the head clerk. As they entered the room, Camilo's gaze snapped straight to the rapier sitting in my hands. "You've finished it," he said.

"Yes. It gave me some trouble," I replied, passing it to him, "but I managed,

one way or another.”

Camilo unsheathed it. The faint glow of the metal combined with the delicate metalwork of the knuckle guard gave the weapon a mystical air, if I do say so myself. Camilo nodded in satisfaction. “I made the right choice to entrust you with this commission.”

A knot of tension unraveled inside me when I heard Camilo’s praise, but I tried to keep the relief from showing on my face. I kept my reply simple. “I’m pleased that you like it.”

“One more thing—remember the supply of appoitakara I mentioned previously?”

“Of course. What about it?”

“I worked out a way to procure some.”

“Just what I wanted to hear!” I exclaimed.

“Thought so. However, you’re going to have to wait a little longer. Appoitakara is even rarer than mithril, so there are a few remaining hoops I have to jump through.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s not your fault. Don’t worry.” I fumbled in my pockets for the coins I’d prepared and took them out. “Let me pay you in advance. I brought the money.”

Camilo immediately palmed the two gold pieces and grinned. “Pleasure doing business.”

Our conversation had veered slightly off its normal course, but our negotiation was fundamentally unchanged. Once we had wrapped up our discussion, the head clerk left the room to direct the loading of our cart.

“Oh, and I forgot to mention earlier,” Camilo said, “but I have an update about the five halberds you entrusted to me.”

“Yes, and...?”

“His Lordship was most eager to purchase them for the guards in his employ,” Camilo reported.

“Good. I didn’t think he would refuse.”

“His Lordship has an additional request he’d like to ask of you.”

“Interesting,” I said. “What is it?”

“He’d like you to make three more halberds for his household’s private guards.”

“I’d be happy to.”

If someone wanted to commission a custom model from me, they needed to journey out to my forge. However, I had no problem taking normal commissions from Camilo.

I’d better make the halberds soon so I don’t accidentally forget about them.

With our official business concluded, we passed the time chatting about news and happenings in the world. These conversations with Camilo were my only source of information about current events. In my previous world, I could find out about an uprising on the other side of the globe with one tap of a finger. Compared to the power of the internet, these once-a-week chats were merely a drop of water in the ocean. Camilo was only one man, and his information was limited to only our region. One of these days when I had time—it didn’t have to be today or tomorrow—I’d have to secure a better source of news.

In any case, from Camilo’s information, it didn’t sound as if there were any wars brewing or monsters, like dragons or ogres, that needed subduing. It was unlikely that soldiers would need to be deployed en masse anytime soon. In other words, it wasn’t likely that I would be forced to drop my work and divert my resources into mass-producing weapons for a war effort. Whether or not I was equipped to complete such an order in the first place was a separate discussion.

While there weren’t any large-scale events, a few fishy rumors were floating in the air. Skirmishes with magical creatures on the border. Disputes, and signs thereof, over water privileges and land rights. Hopefully none of them would blow up out of proportion.

After we concluded all of our business and conversation, we left Camilo's store and headed out of the city. Come to think of it, the guard at the city gate wasn't using a halberd yet; they must need training before they could carry the weapon on the job. As we went, we bid farewell to the guard on duty.

Both the road and the forest were quiet throughout our journey home. We kept watch, but we also took it easier than usual. We reached the cabin quickly, unloaded the goods, and stored them in the house, thus completing our goal.

###

The next day dawned, and it was back to blacksmithing. I was working on the halberds that Marius had commissioned while Rike and the others were forging various weapons. Since this wasn't my first time making halberds, forging three more didn't take long. I was able to finish all of them in two and a half days.

Which brought us to the present day. Day three. With the remaining half of the day, I engraved the halberds with designs befitting the status of a noble family's personal guards. I used the same chisel that I'd reinforced for ornamenting the mithril rapier; it was still sharp, so it carved through the steel as if the metal was butter. Having taken care of the detail work, I could now declare the commission to be complete.

Even with the engravings, the halberds were too plain for ceremonial use, but they were sure to look imposing in the hands of the gate guards at the Eimoor estate.

And so, with the commission behind me, we were back to our normal family routine. The following day, I moved on from forging the halberds and started making the weapons for Camilo's standing order. Rike continued to forge entry-level models. Samya and Diana went out to hunt. We weren't short on meat just yet, but the hunting trip would also double as a patrol trip.

Rike and I were both making knives today, anticipating that Samya and Diana would be taking a break from hunting tomorrow. The two of us each focused on our own work and heated up plates of metal. The crackling of the flames provided a backdrop to the sharp and rhythmic strikes of the hammers. Occasionally, the hiss of metal coming into contact with cold water would slice through the air, followed by the swishing of a blade sliding across a whetstone.

We broke at midday for lunch, then worked through the afternoon.

Just as the sun was starting to set, the orchestral music of our tools was interrupted by a knock at the door.

The tap at the workshop's storefront was restrained and almost timid, a far cry from Helen's unabashed knocking. Helen rapped against the door as if she meant to bash it in. By comparison, our guest today seemed to be on the courteous side.

"I'm coming!" I called toward the door, heaving myself out of my seat. The knocking stopped immediately, so I assumed that they'd heard me.

I unlatched the door and opened it. A woman stood across from me. She was taller than Rike but slightly shorter than Samya. Her lithe frame was clothed in traveler's garments, and her eyes were almond-shaped. Her fine, silver hair—an arresting feature—hung neatly down to her shoulders. However, what really captured my attention were her long and pointed ears.

Based on the woman's appearance, my experience from my previous world, and my installed knowledge, I was pointed to a single conclusion—I was in the presence of an elf.

"Is this the forge belonging to a Master Eizo?" Her voice was high and clear.

"Yes, my name is Eizo, and this is my forge."

"Good. I've come to you with a request."

"You're at the right place, then. Please, come in."

"Thank you."

She followed me obediently as I led her inside. Rike had stopped working and was peering at me. I offered a pacifying gesture to show that everything was all right and then asked her to bring some wine cut with water.

"Please, sit," I told the elf, gesturing toward a chair that was little more than a stout log.

The elf nodded, put down her baggage, and sat in front of the simple table, all without a single sound. Rike soon came with the wine and placed it on the table. The elf dipped her head in thanks.

“So, what did you want to request?” I asked.

In lieu of an explanation, she simply said, “I’ll show you.” She pulled out a cloth-wrapped bundle from her baggage and placed it down before her. Unwrapping the cloth, she revealed the contents. My eyes widened when I saw what was inside.

“I came to beg you to restore this,” she said, a pleading expression on her face.

Lying before me was a mithril blade broken into several pieces.

Chapter 8: The Elven Sword

“I understand your request,” I said severely.

I gazed at the pieces of the broken sword. The blade was wide, only slightly narrower than that of a longsword, but it wasn't very thick. Given the sorry state of this sword, I had difficulty visualizing what it had originally looked like.

“How much of a repair job are you looking for? What condition would you like the sword to be in once I've finished?”

Did she want the sword to look brand-new? Or was she content with the sword being in one piece again? The latter I could finish as early as tomorrow, but a complete restoration would take both time and effort. I had no intention of botching the job like that one infamous amateur on Earth who'd “restored” (ruined) a fresco.

“It would be ideal if you could return it to its original condition,” said the elf in a voice that was as clear and musical as the chime of a bell. “However, should that prove impossible, your best efforts would suffice.”

She wanted me to bring my A game. I hadn't been a blacksmith for long, but I was fired up by those words, as any career craftsman would be.

“There's one thing I want to confirm. Did you come here by yourself?” I asked.

“Yes, I came alone.”

I couldn't be one hundred percent sure she was telling the truth since I couldn't verify with Samya, but she didn't look like she was lying, and I also didn't sense anyone else in the area. Besides, that condition had been designed for clients who wanted new weapons anyway.

I pondered whether I wanted to accept the commission. While I was still thinking, she spoke up again with a slight urgency in her voice. “To be honest, I was using magic to hide my presence on the way here. Will that disqualify me?”

It seemed like she'd misunderstood my silence to mean that I was still

questioning the validity of her assertion that she “came alone.”

There’s magic in this world that can hide one’s presence, huh?

“That won’t be a problem,” I said with a smile. “The condition was for you to come alone, regardless of the methods you chose to use.”

I hadn’t intended the condition to be set in stone anyway.

Hearing my reply, she looked relieved.

“I’ll take on your commission,” I stated.

Suddenly, she slammed her hands down on the table and leaped to her feet. “Really?!” The word seemed to burst out of her, but she immediately recovered her poise and followed up with a quiet, “I-I apologize.” It seemed like her demeanor had done a complete one-eighty. She sat back down gently.

Her outburst had only lasted a few seconds, but it seemed to indicate her true colors. If she was truly as meek as she’d been acting, she wouldn’t have thought to come all the way out here.

“Yes, I’m serious. Is there a time frame you have in mind?”

“The sooner the better, of course, but at the latest, I’d like to request that you finish the restoration within two weeks.”

“I understand.”

Two weeks, eh? That’s a generous amount of time for me to work with.

“I’m sorry to ask,” she said hesitantly, “but I’d also like to check in daily on the progress of the repairs.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Master Eizo, but given the nature of the request, I have to take certain precautions.”

“Of course. I understand.”

Not only was the sword forged from mithril, but it was an *old* sword forged from mithril. It was obvious at a glance that the blade had a long history. It would thus be unacceptable for me to steal the sword and flee. That much was as clear as the light from flames in the furnace.

“I’m not opposed to the idea,” I said, “but won’t it be hard for you to travel here every day?”

“Thank you for your concern. I was actually hoping to stay here, if you would only permit me to borrow a small space on your land.”

She had replied as if it was the most natural thing in the world to sleep in the corner of someone’s backyard. However, I couldn’t let a woman sleep outdoors so close to the forest. Sure, we were safe from bandits, but wolves and bears still posed a threat.

“Wild beasts roam this area, miss,” I pointed out.

She didn’t seem worried. “This clearing is flush with magical energy. I very much doubt that any animals would dare to come close.”

“Excuse me?”

That’s certainly news to me. Come to think of it, we don’t have any magical experts in this family.

“The Black Forest is filled with more magic than most other regions, but the energy is particularly strong around here. That’s why there are no trees growing in this clearing, and most beasts would know to keep their distance,” she explained. “I had assumed that you settled here because of its magical strength. I was impressed by your foresight...”

“First I’ve heard of it...” I hadn’t exactly picked out the cabin either.

Now that she’d pointed it out, it was true that there were never any wolves near the cabin. I’d never even seen a squirrel frolicking around our lumber supply.

“Between the location of your shop and the quality of that mithril rapier you forged, I was positive that you were weaving magic into your blades. Don’t tell me...” She trailed off.

“I can make claims to nothing more than the instincts of a craftsman.” It wasn’t as if I could tell her about my cheats. I mostly forged my blades on instinct, and I certainly didn’t calculate or plan out every strike of my hammer.

The elf’s shoulders slumped in dismay.

Sorry to burst your bubble.

So far, I'd learned two valuable pieces of information from our conversation.

One. She'd come here after seeing the rapier. Given the time frame, she likely saw it somewhere two or three days after I'd delivered it. She must've then visited Camilo in his store and learned our forge's location.

Two. I now had a possible answer to the mystery of why I struggled to forge a custom sword back in the capital—it was because of the magic in this clearing. Considering what she'd just told me, weapons with magic woven into their structures were stronger. Since the area around the forge was rich with magic, the swords I forged here were naturally imbued with power. My hypothesis was that there hadn't been enough magic in the capital to produce the same effect, but when I'd melted down my knife, the magic held within the knife had made up for the deficit.

It was all starting to make sense.

"Well, let's leave the discussions of magic for another time. I couldn't in good conscience leave a woman to sleep outdoors, no matter what you say. Fortunately, we have a guest room. It's sparse, just a spare room, but I hope you'll agree to stay with us for the time being."

I wasn't expecting any other guests in the meantime, especially since Helen had told us that she was being dispatched far away.

The elf seemed to have recovered slightly from her disappointment. "Are you positive?" she asked. "Won't your three wives mind?"

I was taken aback by her words, and my brain briefly short-circuited from the shock. "There are certainly three women living here, but they are not my wives," I finally said. "You are free to stay."

Camilo must be the one spreading these rumors. I'm gonna have a word with him next time.

She looked like she didn't know whether to believe me or not, but she bowed politely nonetheless. "Then, I'll accept your kind offer. Thank you for your hospitality."

The clacking of the clappers in the workshop alerted me of Samya and Diana's return. I looked expectantly at the door that connected the forge with the living space.

How do I explain all of this to the two of them?

As I'd expected, Samya and Diana came through the door before long.

"We're home," said Diana as they entered. She quickly noticed the elf. "Do we have a guest?"

"Yes. This is..." I trailed off, realizing that I hadn't yet asked her name.

The elf rose to her feet and went sweeping into an elegant bow. "My name is Lidy."

"She's a client," I clarified. "She came to request a repair for her sword."

"My name is Diana. I am currently residing here at Forge Eizo. I am pleased to make your acquaintance." Diana was still dressed in her hunting attire, but she'd switched seamlessly into aristocrat mode. I supposed it was second nature to her since she'd grown up as the daughter of a count.

She didn't give her family name. I know she's being cautious, but it's plain as day from her intro that she belongs to the upper class.

"I'm, uh... My name is Samya." On the other hand, Samya's delivery was awkward and stiff. It was obvious that she wasn't used to this level of formality.

It's just a matter of memorizing a few phrases! Perhaps Diana can teach her...

"I am an apprentice of Forge Eizo. My name is Rike. It's a pleasure to meet you," Rike said smoothly and bowed. Her introduction felt the most natural of the three, though the contrast between her courteous manners and her childlike appearance was disorientating.

With family introductions out of the way, I resumed the discussion. "Rike has already heard the details, but due to the value of the sword in question, Miss Lidy will be staying with us while we restore it."

"I hope you'll forgive my selfish request," Lidy said.

"You mean an elf will be living here with us?!" Diana exclaimed, and her face

lit up with excitement. I'd never asked how old Diana was, but her curious nature put even Samya's to shame.

"She'll be observing our work," I corrected her. "It's not quite the same as living together."

"But, she'll be spending her time here, right?"

"Well...yes."

"Then it's just semantics! We'll be housemates," Diana insisted.

"You could put it that way," I conceded. She was so happy that I couldn't bear to rain on her parade. "In any case, Diana and Rike, will you prepare the guest room while I make dinner?"

"Of course," said Diana.

"All right," Rike replied, nodding.

They went back to the living area together.

I turned to Samya. "So, how did the hunting go? What did you catch?"

"Foliage birds," she said. "Five of them." She held up the catch of the day. The birds were named after their feathers, which were the same color and shape as leaves, and were about the size of crows in Japan.

Samya and Diana probably chose smaller prey today because we already had enough meat in storage. There was one bird for each of us, including our guest. Just the right amount for dinner. It had worked out so perfectly, almost like they'd planned it.

"Let's get these plucked quickly, Samya," I said.

"Will do."

We both made to exit the workshop but were stopped by a quiet "Excuse me." The delicate and musical voice belonged to Lidy, of course. "May I assist as well?" she asked.

I appreciated her offer, but she was a guest. As I was about to refuse, she continued speaking. "I have dressed birds before in my village. If you'll permit me, I'd like to help."

I'd assumed that she was a vegetarian and, this whole time, I had actually been wondering what to prepare for her. However, it looked like the elves in this world ate meat. That was lucky for me and for her. If she'd been vegetarian, all we really had to offer were dried root vegetables; it was difficult to find fresh ones in the forest. We could gather fruits in the woods nearby, but there weren't enough for a woman—or anyone really—to eat their fill.

Next time we visit Camilo, I'll ask him for an extra-large supply of vegetables.

"We would be grateful for the help," I replied. "Thank you."

"Of course." For the first time since she'd arrived, Lidy smiled.

And so, the three of us set off to deplume the foliage birds together. I boiled a large pot of water, into which we took turns dipping the birds before plucking out the feathers. It took a while to remove them all. When we finished, we butchered the birds for their meat.

By then, Rike and Diana had finished preparing the guest room, so I had Lidy store her baggage in the room. The other three women busied themselves with the maintenance of their tools and weapons, and I cooked dinner.

Since we were entertaining a new guest, I wanted to serve up a lavish meal befitting the occasion. I settled on chicken sauté finished with a wine sauce. I brought out the wine as well, and brandy for Rike. We all toasted together with both an "*itadakimasu*" and a "cheers!"

Lidy looked stiff at first like she felt out of place. However, we explained that it was our custom to relax over dinner (and breakfast and lunch) and talk about our days. Lidy slowly began to warm up to the conversation and even contributed a few lines herself.

She was going to be staying with us for as long as two weeks, so I hoped she'd grow to enjoy our lifestyle.

###

The next morning, after I returned with fresh water from the lake, the five of us washed up together. The washing basin felt too small with all of us sharing it. Fortunately, Lidy had a smaller build than Helen, so it didn't feel as crowded as when Helen had stayed with us.

We ate breakfast together, sharing our usual menu: a soup with root vegetables and salt-cured pork served with flatbread. I was relieved to see that Lidy didn't have any objections to the food. The number one source of stress after moving to a different environment, which was tough enough to begin with, was a new diet that didn't suit one's tastes. At least, in my personal opinion.

After breakfast, we discussed our plans for the day. Mine was obvious, and as was Rike's, since she'd be observing me as part of her training. I asked what Samya and Diana were planning to do, and both of them wanted to watch the restoration work as well. I didn't have any reason to turn them down, so with Lidy's permission, we decided that everyone would be accompanying me in the forge today.

I'm happy if they're happy.

Moving to the workshop, I ushered my audience along.

In the workshop, we gathered around the pieces of the sword. Step one was putting the jigsaw puzzle together. The broad-of-width but slim-of-thickness sword was broken into eight pieces of different sizes and shapes. First, we had to sort out the sword's shape, a problem that had nothing to do with blacksmithing ability or lack thereof. All five of us, including Lidy, collaborated to put the puzzle together. It was rowdy with everyone helping and felt more like play than work.

Restoring a mithril sword was more straightforward than restoring a steel sword. Reheating steel would undo the strengthening effect of the quenching step, which meant that I'd have to re-quench the sword again once I welded the pieces together. Otherwise, the resulting sword wouldn't be as durable or strong. Those extra steps would've been a hassle, but luckily, I didn't have to worry about any of that with mithril.

However, every material came with its own set of pros and cons. The tradeoff to using mithril was that the welding itself would take more time and effort.

Hmm, come to think of it, quenching and tempering steel are made easy by my cheats, so as long as I have them, I'd figure out how to re-treat steel one way

or another. In that case, mithril may be the more difficult metal to work with after all.

My plan was to start by welding the hilt and the base of the blade together. I fired up the furnace with a spark of magic.

“You practice magic, don’t you, Master Eizo?” Lidy asked. “I noticed you lit the kitchen stove with magic yesterday as well.”

I hadn’t even been thinking about it. Using small bits of magic was a part of my daily life.

“I suppose you could say that,” I responded. “However, igniting a fire and raising a light breeze are about the limits of my abilities.”

“Even that level of magic usually requires a fair amount of training. How is it that you know so little about magic despite having trained in it?” Lidy asked this with a crooked smile and a raised brow. Her sardonic smile was more than a little intimidating.

She doesn’t believe that my knowledge of magic is basically zero, does she?

My magical abilities—my *very limited* magical abilities—were gifts rather than the result of hard work and practice. Rike and Diana couldn’t use magic at all, to say nothing of Samya.

If I were pressed, I’d say that, out of the three of them, Diana would probably know the most about magic. However, as the young lady of a comital family, she hadn’t needed to know much about it. Unless she had wanted to specialize in magic, there’d been no reason for her to learn.

Wait...was that true?

“Diana, you said you aren’t familiar with magic, right?” I asked pointedly.

She averted her gaze and stammered out, “M-My studies weren’t focused on magic.”

That’s the face of a guilty person. I bet she skipped all her classes.

Magic was a useful skill to have but not a necessity for day-to-day life. Our favorite tomboy here must’ve ditched all her magical studies in favor of learning

swordsmanship.

“Don’t worry. I’m not upset,” I reassured her.

“I-I wasn’t worried.” Even so, Diana looked like a weight had just been lifted off her shoulders.

With a youngest daughter like Diana, the Eimoor household must’ve been a lively one.

“Does that satisfy you?” I asked Lidy. “No one here is familiar with magic. I must admit, our ignorance is a source of embarrassment.”

“I see,” Lidy responded simply, before sinking into thought.

The flames were burning bright and hot in the furnace. Using tongs, I picked up both the hilt of the sword and the base piece of the blade, then slid them into the fire. I fanned the flames with a bit of wind magic.

Lidy watched my movements, the wheels of her mind spinning. If she pried further, I’d tell her that I picked up magic along the way, that it wasn’t anything I put much thought into. There was nothing more to say, so she would have to be satisfied with that.

I heated the mithril until my cheats indicated that the metal was at the ideal temperature for forging. Then, I removed both pieces.

The top of the hilt and the bottom of the blade piece were glowing with heat, which permeated the surrounding metal as well. Rike helped me transfer the two pieces to the anvil, orient them, and bump them right up next to each other. If I were welding steel, I’d have to use borax or another type of flux at the joint, but that wouldn’t be necessary for mithril. What was necessary, on the other hand, was increased precision during both heating and hammering.

I took the hammer and beat the metal where the pieces came together. One strike in and I could already tell—welding the pieces together was going to take more effort than shaping mithril from scratch. I doubted that many blacksmiths had the skill to repair a sword like this one.

After just three strikes, the metal had already cooled below its target temperature range. The two pieces had just begun to seam together. I

redistributed the charcoal before transferring the joined pieces back to the firebed, making sure to focus the heat on the weld.

“This is going to be a tough one,” I mumbled to myself without thinking.

Out of nowhere, Lidy asked, “Are the repairs feasible?” I jumped slightly, startled. She had slinked up right next to me while I’d been absorbed in my work. Her face, creased with concern, was practically right next to mine.

My heart pounded as I tried to formulate a response. “Restoring it to its original condition will be difficult, though I believe not impossible. It’ll take me time, but I should be able to finish within the next two weeks.”

“That’s a relief to hear. Thank you.”

“There’s no need for thanks. I’m only doing my job.”

I returned my gaze to the firebed. It wouldn’t be long before the mithril was ready to be removed again.

When the pieces hit the right temperature, I transferred them back to the anvil. I hammered the metal carefully to remove all the gaps between the two pieces while preserving the glimmer of the mithril. I struck the weld three times, and with my cheat-heightened senses, I intuitively knew that the two pieces had come together just a little more.

I wanted to increase my pace, but a single mistake could ruin the restoration. I returned the pieces to the furnace to reheat.

Lidy soon spoke up. “I knew it. You were holding out on me after all, Master Eizo.” She had backed away a few paces. “You *are* able to see magical essence.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re deliberately choosing where you hit in order to maintain the flow of magic through the metal. Am I right?”

“That’s not exactly how I would describe it...” I said. “I can see what looks like shimmering grains throughout the mithril. I’m simply trying my best not to scatter those grains.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about!” Lidy exclaimed, lunging toward me.

I suddenly found myself staring into her sapphire blue eyes, which were framed by long lashes. She was so close that I could feel her breath on my skin. I froze up in shock.



Lidy suddenly straightened up and took a step back. She coughed politely. “I apologize for startling you. In any case, the grains that you see are the heart of magic. I knew that you could sense magic, even if you didn’t know for yourself.”

“I suppose you’re right then.” I could also see the composition of steel, and it looked completely different from mithril. I chose to keep that fact to myself.

“That’s one mystery solved,” Lidy stated with a grin. She seemed to be in high spirits.

“I’ve also learned something today, so I must thank you as well,” I replied somewhat clumsily.

I removed the sword pieces from the fire and took up the hammer once again.

It was just a little past noon, and I’d finished welding the first piece to the hilt. I checked the joint. The sparkling particles—what Lidy had called magical essence—were uniform in structure, except for a break at the joint itself. I ran my finger along where I knew the seam to be, but the metal was smooth beneath my fingertips. Therefore, the break in the particles wasn’t physical in nature, but magical.

If I didn’t fix this disrupted flow, sooner or later, the blade would cause trouble for its wielder, and I suspected that this wielder practiced a particularly brutal style of swordsmanship. They must’ve pushed this sword to its brink for it to have broken into so many pieces. Even if I restored it, such savage swordplay would cause it to break again before long, and when a weapon failed, it would often cost the wielder their life.

“Miss Lidy, can you take a look at this for me?” I gestured to the seam with my fingers, directing her gaze to where the magic was disrupted.

Lidy concentrated on the metal piece for a long moment, running her eyes along the joint, before she finally murmured, “I see. The flow of the magic is broken here.”

Next, I passed the sword over to Rike. “Does it look like that to you as well?”

Rike took longer than Lidy to examine the sword. “Now that you mention it, I can sense that something is off,” she said hesitantly. “However, the weld itself looks clean to my eyes.” She handed it back to me.

Her intuition is pointing her to the correct path. I can't wait to see how she grows from here on out.

Samya and Diana were neither magic users nor blacksmiths, so neither of them were confident, but they too could sense *something*.

Is it because they've been helping in the forge? Or is it an effect of the mithril itself?

“Miss Lidy, leaving the sword in this state is out of the question, correct?” I didn't think I needed to ask, but since it had been broken once, there was a possibility that the sword was destined for no more than ceremonial use. I needed to know if it was going to be used in battle again.

“Yes. If at all possible, I'd like it restored to its original state,” she responded.

“That's what I thought.”

I crossed my arms and stopped to think. I could certainly heat and hammer the pieces together until they were welded smoothly, but the repairs couldn't stop there—I also had to figure out how to restore the inherent magical properties of the sword.

Hmmm, the cleanest way to do this might just be the tsumiwakashi technique, something Japanese swordsmiths used to forge katana swords. The bottom of the blade that's welded to the hilt could be shaped into a base block, and if I arrange the rest of the pieces on top, I can forge weld the mithril into a billet. Then, it would be easier to elongate evenly.

Restoring the sword to its original appearance wasn't going to be an issue. I had confidence in my skills...and cheats.

The problem was whether or not Lidy would permit me to do so. Essentially, I would be remaking the sword from scratch—only the base materials would be the same. I recalled a famous thought experiment, the Ship of Theseus, and realized that I was in the opposite situation. That experiment questioned whether the identity of an object was fundamentally changed if all its parts

were swapped out, while I was wondering whether an object built anew from its original components was still the same object.

Regardless, there was a limit to what could be done by simply welding together broken pieces. In Lidy's case, the sword had only been broken into eight large pieces, but what if it had been shattered completely? In that case, it would've been nearly impossible to restore the sword *exactly* back to its original state. If I thought about it from that perspective, was there really such a big difference between welding together metal and forging it anew? Restoring the sword's outer appearance was no problem, but there was a choice to be made here: was it more important to preserve the sword's function or its theoretical identity?

I explained my thinking to Lidy, making sure to emphasize that, no matter the process, the sword would *look* the same in the end; I'd be able to restore its appearance perfectly, whichever option she chose.

"To summarize, we have two options: The first is to restore the sword by welding the pieces as I've been doing. The second is to forge the sword anew using the mithril. Either way, I can guarantee that the restored sword will look identical to the original."

Lidy's brows furrowed as she listened. She stared down at the floor in thought, seeming torn.

I was pretty confident I could reforge the sword in the two-week time span, though I wouldn't have any freedom with the design as I'd had with the rapier. This sword was also broader than the rapier, so the additional metalwork meant more time spent forging. Also, I could run into unpredictable obstacles, which would slow me down. I hoped Lidy would make a decision as soon as possible. Ideally, right now. Of course, since the decision was irreversible, I knew she couldn't make it lightly.

The only thing that marked the passage of time was the quiet crackling of the flames in the furnace. The four of us waited in silence for Lidy to make up her mind.

At last, Lidy raised her head. Her expression was serious. "Please reforge it from scratch."

“You won’t be able to change your mind later, so I have to ask—are you sure?”

“Yes, I am. I wish for the sword to be restored, not only in form but in function.” Lidy was gazing at me, grim-faced but determined.

I shot her a bold and cheerful smile, hoping to set her mind at ease, then asserted, “You can count on me.”

On the sidelines, Rike, Samya, and Diana all expelled relieved sighs.

“Time to start over,” I said, slapping my hands to my face to pump myself up for the challenge ahead. I had to pay back Lidy’s resolve, otherwise Forge Eizo would lose face.

Before diving into the smithing, I first had to make sure that I could reproduce the sword’s appearance later. It was a standard longsword in shape, but I also wanted to record its exact width, length, and thickness. I fetched a log of wood from the storage outside and painstakingly carved it to match the pieced-together sword. This ended up being a model matching (what I thought to be) the sword’s original appearance. As long as I had this model, I wouldn’t forget how the sword looked.

Next, I moved the hilt and blade piece, which I had welded together, back into the furnace and raised the mithril to forging temperature once again. I transferred it back to the anvil and started to hammer the bottom piece of the blade into a longer rectangle. The mithril felt stiff and unyielding, even more so than when I’d forged the rapier. My focus narrowed down to my hammer and the mithril, with my goal being to eliminate any and all gaps in the metal.

I went back and forth between the furnace and the anvil. When the rectangular plate finally took shape, I arranged the other pieces of the sword carefully on top of it. I wrapped straw rope around the mithril pieces and transferred the assortment back into the furnace to heat. One benefit to working with mithril was that I wouldn’t have to deal with oxide film, which was a normal by-product of steelwork.

Once the surface of the mithril had just begun to show signs of melting, I removed the metal from the fire, cleared off the ashen remains of the rope with

my hammer, and waited a breath for the metal to cool slightly.

Then, I struck it. The mithril felt no softer than usual, so there was no way I'd finish the welding today...not that I had expected to do so.

Heat, shape, elongate, and fold. Heat, shape, elongate, and fold. I repeated these four steps over and over again. Through my cheats, I would be able to tell when the metal was sufficiently fused, but right now, it simply wasn't.

I found myself utterly absorbed by my work. Before I knew it, dusk had fallen.

The mithril is resisting me more than I thought it would. This is going to take time.

I took a moment to reflect on the day's work and informed the others I'd be closing up shop. After all, I still had to prepare dinner.

###

The next day, my audience halved. Only Lidy and Rike would be observing me. Samya and Diana went out to gather fruit and herbs because, and I quote, "It's for our elven guest." The popularity of the vegetarian stereotype apparently wasn't exclusive to Earth. We had all seen Lidy eat meat (she'd eaten it last night!), but it was hard to uproot a stereotype when you grew up believing it.

I set up in the forge. The block of mithril had yet to come together and still looked like a vaguely sword-shaped lump. I reheated the metal to forging temperature, removed it from the fire once it was ready, and began to shape it once more. It might've been my imagination, but I could've sworn that the more I worked on it, the harder the mithril became. However, I could also tell that the pieces were slowly welding together. The sparkling grains—the magical essence—had increased as well.

"Miss Lidy, may I ask a question?"

"Of course," she said. "What is it?"

"Has the concentration of magic essence in the mithril increased?"

"It has. You're right. Your skill at imbuing metal with magic is quite impressive, Master Eizo."

I've seen these particles when working with steel too. Looks like there's a

proper explanation for the luster of my custom models.

“The mithril also feels like it’s been hardening by degrees.”

“That’s expected too,” Lidy said and nodded with satisfaction. “I made the right decision in coming here.” She didn’t elaborate further.

She reminds me of some of my previous coworkers... One of those people who assumes everyone around her knows exactly what she’s thinking.

Never mind that. She didn’t refute the idea that the mithril had hardened. Is that a known property of mithril? I don’t remember the mithril responding this way when I was making the rapier though...

I decided to sweep aside my doubts and focus on the simple truth at hand: the more magic I imbued into the mithril, the harder it would grow. I took up the hammer again, striking the mithril as precisely as I could, and freely drew from my cheat abilities to ensure that the welding was a success.

I hadn’t yet internalized the idea that I could weave magic into metal and that I had been doing it unconsciously all along. The impact of my hammer against the mithril seemed to grow more dense and dull with every strike, which meant that the effort increased in proportion as well. It was hard labor.

I repeated the heating and hammering cycle, and the weight of the moment of impact grew heavier and heavier. And then, suddenly, the sensation of the strikes lightened up again.

Did I hit the limit of how much magic the mithril can contain?

I was relieved. The mithril would’ve been nigh on impossible to work if it had continued growing harder past that point. Along with relief, I felt genuine pride and pleasure—I had filled the mithril to the brim with magic. The restoration was far from being complete, but the fact that I could hone the metal to this extent was a win in and of itself.

The forge welding took me until well past noon to finish.

It’s going to be an uphill battle from here on out too.

Rike, Lidy, and I took a late lunch, and then it was back to work for me.

No slacking off now!

Fundamentally, the steps to forging a sword were identical for both steel and mithril: heat the metal in the firebed, then hammer it out to elongate it. The main difference was in the difficulty and effort. I had gotten a taste of it in the beginning, when I'd welded the bottom blade piece to the hilt of the sword. Maintaining the magical flow while keeping an eye on the temperature of the mithril *and* making sure my strikes were precise... It was exhausting work. I was constantly shuffling between the furnace and the anvil.

"This is going to be leagues more challenging than the rapier," I grumbled without thinking.

"Even for you, Boss?" Rike asked.

"Yes. I feel as if someone just ordered me to sprint across a tightrope strung across a gorge," I replied truthfully without holding back.

If working with mithril is already this tough, how am I going to be able to do anything with the appoitakara?

Lidy's worried expression snapped me out of my thoughts.

Damn. I should know better than to complain in front of a client. That's a sign that my resolve as a craftsman is lacking.

"Don't worry, Miss Lidy. It will take time, but I promise to restore the sword to its original condition." I smiled as brightly as I could despite my internal worries, and her expression eased slightly.

Time to get down to business.

By the end of the day, I was about a third of the way done with hammering the metal out to the right size, which was the first phase of shaping. The mithril wasn't anywhere close to looking like a sword yet.

This is all I'm going to be doing for the next couple of days, so it'll be meaningless for Rike to watch me repeat the same steps over and over again. Tomorrow is a city day, but after that, I'll ask Rike to return to forging swords on her own.

Tomorrow, I resolved to tell Camilo that we'd be skipping a week of delivery. We weren't short on money, and I didn't have any urgent work for Camilo, so I didn't foresee any problems with taking a break from our weekly trips.

Samya and Diana returned from their foraging with a bounty of fruits that looked like blueberries and some herbs that smelled like peppermint. Before dinner, I washed the blueberries and set some aside for dinner; I wanted to make a sauce for the meal, and also have some to eat as dessert. As for the rest of the berries, I put them into a small bottle and filled that bottle up with brandy to steep.

The peppermint-like herbs got washed as well. I nibbled on a piece of a leaf. It had a stronger scent than its equivalent on Earth, but otherwise, it was nearly indistinguishable from the peppermint I knew.

I'll experiment with making mint tea tomorrow morning.

Over dinner, the other four, including Lidy, complimented the taste of the blueberry sauce I'd made. They, of course, enjoyed the fresh blueberries as well. I decided to pour out a bit of the blueberry liqueur, and everyone was thrilled when I told them. Fruit liqueurs were popular with women, and everyone here except me was a woman. Rike practically flew out of her chair in excitement.

Trust a dwarf to get this excited about drinking. I guess I can overlook her behavior this once.

As we were chatting, I brought up a question that'd been on my mind. "Miss Lidy, I've been meaning to ask... I always thought that elves ate only vegetables and fruit. Are elves actually omnivorous?"

"Yes. We often hunt the birds and deer in the forest we live in," Lidy replied.

"I see."

"However, most of our diet consists of the yams and vegetables we grow in the fields," she continued. "There is a limit to the amount of meat we can get by hunting."

"That makes sense." Birds and deer weren't all-you-can-hunt animals.

“I was sure that elves only ate fruit,” Samya admitted without reservation. Rike and Diana nodded in agreement as well. The association of elves with vegetarianism was strong in this world, just like back on Earth.

“It’s a common misconception. I’ve been to many establishments that have only served us vegetables,” Lidy said.

“I bet.” I’d almost made that mistake myself.

“It has nothing to do with personal preferences though. I’m thrilled to get a chance to try meat that I don’t usually find in my village! It’d be a shame to restrict myself to vegetables while I’m here.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said.

Tomorrow, we head into the city. And after that, it’s back to work. Don’t give up, Eizo!

###

For breakfast the next day, I steeped some of the mint (or rather, the mint doppelgänger) in hot water and made tea for everyone, along with the usual breakfast assortment. The tea had a faint medicinal aftertaste, but it was otherwise smooth and mellow.

It makes a rather convincing tea substitute. I’ll have to look into this further.

While we ate, I explained the day’s plans to Lidy. “Samya, Rike, Diana, and I are heading into the nearby city to drop off our wares. What are your plans, Miss Lidy? You’re free to join us if you wish.”

I didn’t want to leave her in the cabin by herself. Still, I couldn’t help but think that a party with a four-to-one woman-to-man ratio would be sure to turn heads. Plus, among the four of them, there was a tiger-woman, a dwarf, and an elf. We were bound to attract attention from shadier types with that party composition.

Well, as long as His Lordship wasn’t slacking off at the reins, we weren’t likely to run into any trouble while traveling.

But there was one other problem: the mithril sword.

Will it be secure if we leave it in the cabin? Perhaps Lidy will want to stay

behind as a guard.

Nothing else in the cabin was valuable. Robbers could come ransack the house and steal all our money for all I cared. We could always earn more. However, I hoped these hypothetical robbers would do us the courtesy of leaving behind our pots and pans. We wouldn't be able to eat without them.

"I'll go with you," Lidy decided. "The sword will be safe here."

"All right, then. Pack what you'll need for the journey."

Lidy nodded. "I'll do that." She rose from the table and disappeared into the guest room.

She agreed to accompany us more easily than I'd expected. I had a feeling there was something else she knew about the cabin's surroundings that she hadn't yet shared, although it wasn't as if I was planning to force that information from her. Honestly, I was happy to take a sit-back-and-wait approach to gathering intel.

I returned to my own room to prepare for the trip.

The luggage cart was Rike's and my responsibility. We couldn't in good conscience ask a guest like Lidy to help haul our cargo, but I did ask her about how she wanted to spend the journey. She replied that she had good eyesight, so I offered that she keep watch with Samya and Diana.

As we walked, I considered the modes of transportation—or lack thereof—we had available to us.

I should rethink the idea of this human-powered cart. Our delivery quota is more likely to increase than decrease, and the cart itself sticks out like a sore thumb. A horse-drawn cart would be more convenient...but then we would need to think about fodder. But the benefits of having a horse outweigh the drawbacks. Maybe someday in the future...

The scenery all around us looked like it had been painted by an artist. The green-hued light formed a backdrop for the painting, and it was punctuated periodically by the harsh, black bars that were the trunks of the trees. The canopy rustled overhead as we trekked through the forest, and the gentle

breeze cooled my skin.

I wonder if Lidy can hear the voices of the trees, or is that too much to ask, even for an elf?

Diana was fidgety and restless, her gaze darting around our surroundings. I felt a pang of sympathy.

Samya suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, and I snapped to attention. “Did your senses pick up something dangerous?” I asked.

“Not...exactly,” she replied hesitantly. Her ears swiveled and her nose twitched as she smelled the air, trying to pinpoint whatever it was that had piqued her interest. After a while, she relaxed and said, “Aaah, so we meet again.” She pulled something out of her pocket and tossed it into the nearby thicket. I strained my eyes for a better look, and it turned out to be a chunk of dried meat.

A rustling came from the thicket. Then, a small furball came bounding out of the shadows. Our mysterious visitor looked exactly like a brown puppy, but it was, in fact, the wolf pup.

Diana pointed and opened her mouth wide in an excited scream. However, no sound came out of her mouth. She was trying not to scare away the pup.

Artfully done.

I understood perfectly what Diana had been feeling all this time. The wolf pup was undeniably adorable since it looked identical to a puppy. Its tail wagged back and forth as it chomped down on the meat. It’d make a good pet.

My eyes crinkled and a smile tugged at my lips. At some point, Diana had come to stand next to me. She started smacking my shoulder repeatedly. It hurt!

What are you so worked up about? Calm down.

The puppy... The, uh, wolf puppy finished eating and turned toward us, its tail still wagging energetically.

“Arf!”

I was subjected to another round of furious hitting.

Calm down, will you?!

The pup looked like it was about to approach us when a large wolf appeared out of nowhere. *That must be its mother.* The pup noticed its mom, bounded over, and started frolicking around her feet. The sight warmed my heart to see. The mother wolf nosed at her pup tenderly, and the two of them disappeared back into the thickets.

When they were gone, I said, “So those are the wolves you two met. I gotta say, that was one cute pup.”

“I KNOW, RIGHT?!” Diana screamed excitedly. My ears hurt from the volume.

“I get why you were looking so hard for it. It’s an adorable fluff ball.”

“Right?!”

“But,” I continued, “it would be cruel to separate it from its mother.”

“Oh...I suppose...” Diana deflated slightly.

“Once in a blue, blue moon, there are pups that’ve been abandoned by their mom. Or pups that have lost their way,” Samya said as if she were revealing a secret. “Maybe we can bring one of those home.”

Diana immediately brightened and latched onto the suggestion. “Yeah! If we find a lost pup, we have to rescue it! We can’t let a poor pup starve alone.” Reenergized, she clenched her fists in front of her and nodded firmly.

Rike, Lidy, and I looked at each other and sighed.

Putting the excitement behind us, we continued through the forest. Before long, we had to trade the cover of the trees for the vulnerability of the city road. We were conspicuous on the vast and open terrain, so we doubled down on our guard. Samya put all five senses to use; Diana was scanning our surroundings again with a more acute vigilance than she’d had in the forest; Lidy cast her gaze farther out. I felt more secure knowing that we had an extra pair of eyes.

The Eimoors seemed to have asserted their rule over the region, despite the rockiness of the initial transition of power. Fortunately, we didn’t encounter any difficulties on the road. If anything had happened, it would’ve stressed out

Diana, so I was relieved for her sake too that all was well.

Marius's fellow guard was once again absent from the gate today, but the guard on duty—who was still equipped with a short spear, not a halberd—was no longer a stranger to us.

He knows our faces by now. I'll try asking him if he knows anything.

"Good morning," I greeted.

"Hey, good to see you folks," he replied jovially after taking a serious look at Lidy.

"Pardon the sudden question, but would you happen to know if one of the guards here—the one who was friends with Marius—was transferred?" I asked. "He purchased a sword from me, so I'd like to follow up with him about the sword's condition if possible."

"Who? Oh, I know. The guard you're looking for was pulled by Marius over to the capital."

"And that's why we haven't seen him in some time. I see now," I said. "Thank you. I'll try to contact him if I visit the capital."

"Please do. I'm sure he'd be glad to hear from you."

We exchanged goodbyes and then continued into the city. If what the guard had said was true, then congratulations were in order. A transfer to the capital could be considered a promotion.

Yet, one part of the conversation was bugging me—the guard had called Marius by his first name. Had that been a sign of disrespect or a sign of affection from bonds forged when Marius had been a guard? It was hard for me to judge.

The city streets were packed with people pushing in every possible direction. As we passed, people stared at us with curiosity, and in particular, at Lidy. Elves were a rare sight in this region, just like the others had told me. The attention we were drawing grated on my nerves.

There was the occasional person who glared at Lidy with open animosity, but

no one approached us. It was well known that anyone who made a careless remark toward an elf would soon find themselves in hot water. Who knew if the rumors were backed by truth or not, but the stereotype was likely furthered by the elves' elusiveness.

As far as my experience went, elves could be surprisingly similar to your average human (though they were anything but, of course). They weren't immune to bad habits such as taking for granted that everyone knew what they were talking about.

We finally arrived at Camilo's. Once inside, Lidy relaxed a little. As usual, we dropped the cart off in the storehouse and headed up to the conference room. Camilo took longer than usual to join us.

"Hey. Looks like you're busy today," I said when he came in.

"Eh," he said with a shrug. "Here and there."

Come to think of it, Camilo always met us in person when we came by. I suppose he had the time since he wasn't needed to manage people and goods on the ground level, but it was still surprising that, up to this point, he'd never had a conflicting meeting. Out of curiosity, I asked him, and he replied, "You folks always stop by around the same time, so I try to keep my schedule open on the days I think you'll be coming."

"What if we didn't come?"

"Then I have other work to do instead. It's not an issue."

"That's good." I'd been worried that we were disrupting his schedule and was relieved to hear otherwise. "Shall we get down to business then?"

"Sure," Camilo agreed. "First, I have something for you."

Camilo looked over at the head clerk and tipped his head. The head clerk approached with a rather large, cloth-wrapped package and laid it on the table. He unwrapped it to reveal a blue-banded metal ore.

"Could this be...?"

"Yeah. This is the appoitakara you requested."

This is what a legendary metal looks like. Unforgivable and strong. Unfortunately, I won't be able to test it out anytime soon... The mithril sword's going to occupy me for a while yet.

"Thank you. I hope it wasn't too much trouble to procure," I said as the head clerk rewrapped the ore and took it away.

"You already compensated me plenty. Don't worry about it," Camilo said with a grin. "Other than the appoitakara, I'm assuming you'll be wanting your usual?"

"Yeah. Only, we didn't bring as many swords and knives as we normally do. If it's not enough to cover the cost of the supplies, let me know. I brought money just in case."

Based on the cost calculations from our previous trades, I was pretty sure that we'd still brought enough merchandise to cover our purchases. However, the price of pepper or something could have risen in the meantime, so I'd wanted to be prepared.

"We still have about half of your last delivery in storage. I'm not worried," Camilo said. "Even if you end up owing me, you can make it up next time."

"Thanks. That works," I said. "One more thing, I'm currently working on a custom model commission. I was thinking of skipping next week's delivery."

"Aaah, so you are. Not a problem. I'll have my workers prepare extra supplies for you then."

"Thank you. I promise I'll make up the difference next time."

"I'll hold you to that."

Our negotiations went smoothly as always. Afterward, I asked Camilo about news from the capital. He told us that Marius was happy and healthy. Diana looked relieved when she heard.

There was only one worrying piece of news. It seemed like some magical beasts had recently been causing trouble near the country's border, which could, in the near future, result in a troop deployment to quell the disturbance.

The Eimoor family dispute had started with Karel's lies about magical beast

attacks, but unlike then, the news this time seemed reliable.

What a mess...

Camilo would have to stock up if he wanted to get ahead of the situation, and we'd have to be disciplined with our deliveries in order to not let him down. I should prepare just in case we have to scale up production.

I traded a few more minor stories with Camilo before my group headed home. Overall, the journey was relatively uneventful, but before we left the city, Lidy still attracted an uncomfortable amount of stares.

It's not just that she's an elf, but she's a beauty too. Or are good looks part and parcel of being an elf?

I had been worried there were more sinister reasons behind the staring, so I was relieved that we'd returned safely. I didn't even want to imagine what would've happened if Lidy had ended up in trouble.

Back at the cabin, we unloaded the cart and stored away the supplies. I put away the appoitakara with the other metals in the workshop. Lidy lent us a hand too. She carried in the vegetables and the other lighter goods.

On the days we went to the city, we usually used the remaining daylight hours as free time to do whatever we wanted. I was in the middle of Lidy's commission, but I consulted with her and she agreed that we could take a breather for the rest of the day.

I was eager to work with the appoitakara, but it would be just that: work. Instead, I decided to start on a project of personal significance to me.

In the workshop, I first gathered up some of the leftover wood from crafting scabbards and the like. I was able to find several larger planks, so the scraps would be plenty for my plans.

I used my trusty old friend, my custom knife with its razor-sharp blade, to cut the wood into the right shapes.

Was magic the reason behind the sharp edges of my custom models? That's food for thought for the next time I forge one.

My goal was to build everything without using nails, which meant I had to spend a lot of time carving out the interlocking joints. Luckily, I was able to finish the woodwork with some light still left in the sky, so I had time to assemble the pieces.

I slotted them together, one after another. When I was done, a miniature (and somewhat crooked) house-like object sat on the worktop before me. It was about the size of my palm. I hadn't been too clear on what the shape should look like and was just working off my memories. As far as I knew (and as far as the installed data was concerned), the object didn't have an equivalent in this world. Guess I would just have to be satisfied with it.

After that, I made a simple shelf from another piece of wood, nailed it to the wall, and placed the mini house on the shelf.

There. A simple but serviceable *kamidana*.

Having grown up in Japan, I felt restless without an altar in the house, and if I couldn't buy one, then naturally I'd have to make one. If I was following tradition, I should've installed the *kamidana* in the living area, but personally, I thought it suited the workshop well.

I didn't know if creating a Shinto altar would displease the gods of this world, but I hoped they would be benevolent enough to overlook it, especially considering that the Shinto gods that were usually enshrined in *kamidana* may not even exist in this world.

I took a small dish and cup from the kitchen, filled them with salt and water respectively, and set them on the shelf. As part of my morning routine from now on, I resolved to change out the salt and water.

I bowed in front of the *kamidana*, clapped once, and then excused myself to start preparing dinner.

###

After returning from the lake the next morning, I replaced the offerings of salt and water in the *kamidana*. I didn't want to waste the salt and water by throwing them out, so I used them in the soup for breakfast. The rest of my morning routine was unchanged.

Once we'd eaten, we discussed the plans for the day. The mithril sword restoration would keep me busy. Rike, Samya, and Diana planned to forge entry-level models for the next several days. Our delivery to Camilo wouldn't be for another two weeks, but ideally, we would also bring double our normal quota. Lidy would be observing me...or supervising? One or the other.

When I entered the workshop, I first went up to the *kamidana*. Facing it, I moved through the typical prayer ritual. Clap twice, bow twice, pray, and bow one more time. I prayed for my work to go smoothly. Though there might not be a god to receive my prayer, going through the ritual helped ground me for the work ahead. Just the subtle effect it had on my focus made crafting the *kamidana* worth the effort.

Everyone watched as I performed the ritual. Afterward, Rike asked, "Boss, what are you doing?"

"This is how we pay our respects to the gods back in my old northern home," I explained.

"What is the significance of that peculiar little house on the shelf?"

"Hmm, how do I explain...? It acts as a simple household shrine."

"I didn't know the north had such an interesting custom," Rike mused.

"It might just be a tradition in my family," I said. "I can't promise it actually has an effect either."

After listening to our exchange, Lidy asked, "Do you have a family name, Master Eizo?"

Aaah, no one's told her yet.

I decided to answer honestly. "Yes. However, my circumstances are complicated, as you can probably guess, considering our remote location."

"I see. That's why you don't introduce yourself with your family name."

"Exactly."

Lidy nodded with an appeased expression. I supposed she was the type that couldn't relax if there was anything she didn't understand.

“Boss,” Rike started hesitantly, “is it all right for us to join you in the ritual?”

“Hm? Absolutely—you’re welcome to. It’s not a particularly private ceremony.” In fact, it was more proper for everyone in the family to join in.

“May I perform it as well?” Lidy asked.

“Of course.”

I taught the four of them the ritual. We clapped twice, bowed twice, and clapped once more all together. I joined them even though I had already done it once today.

Two humans, a member of the beastfolk, a dwarf, and an elf... A group of different races from different homelands. When I performed the ritual with my new family and friends, an unnameable emotion swelled up inside me. It was the same warmth I felt when we all said “*itadakimasu*” together.

Well, that was one more family tradition for the books.

Once we finished our prayer, we officially began work for the day. I lit the firebed and magically raised a light breeze to fan the flames. Once the charcoal was good and hot, I slid the mithril sword into the fire. Then, I lit the other furnace for Rike, Samya, and Diana to use.

I watched as the temperature of the mithril crept upward. Once it reached the peak of its forging temperature range, I pulled it out to shape. The mithril sang under my hammer, producing pure and clear notes as if it were glass and not metal. Musical tones rang throughout the workshop, and the mithril gleamed as I hammered it. I worked quickly, trying to fit in as many strikes as I could before the metal cooled and hardened once more.

Speed wasn’t exactly the goal, and I couldn’t hammer the mithril wherever I pleased. If my strike was so much as a centimeter off, I would end up driving out some of the magic I’d weaved in. So, I balanced speed and precision as I shaped the mithril, a feat that I suspected would’ve been difficult for the vast majority of human smiths.

It was rare for a human smith to understand the technicalities of forging with mithril, but it was even rarer to find one with a knowledge of magic. I couldn’t

claim to completely understand magic, but I could at least see the power flowing in the metal. As it stood though, people with even my limited magical senses were likely to have chosen the safety and security of being a warlock rather than the backbreaking profession of a blacksmith.

I wonder how many humans in this world can wield magic? How rare is it exactly?

I ended up drawing this conclusion: there were few, if any, human blacksmiths who could properly forge using mithril.

When mithril was filled to its limit with magical essence, it felt dense and heavy to hammer. The dull sensation was a stark contrast to the bright sound mithril made when struck. Elongating the mithril block was a struggle; the temperature of the metal dropped out of the target zone after only a few blows.

Back and forth, over and over, I slid the sword into the firebed and then transferred it to the anvil once it was hot again. The clear ringing of the mithril filled the room as I worked, accompanied by the sound of Rike striking steel as she forged the entry-level swords. Next to us both, Samya and Diana were making molds for casts, melting down ore in the furnace, and filling the molds with the molten metal.

We worked to a symphony composed of the flame's crackling, the wind's soft rush, and the metal's varied melodies. The space felt comfortable, like home.

The mithril fought me at every turn. Every new centimeter of length was an uphill battle, and I progressed at a crawling pace. By the end of the day, I had the mithril elongated to two-thirds of its final length. Given its stubbornness, I truly hoped that I'd be able to finish the restoration within the deadline.

Relative to an average blacksmith, I was working quickly, but I still felt pressured—my progress was so slow compared to when I forged a steel sword. The only thing that drove me forward was the enchanting song of the mithril. If not for that, my work would've been even more sluggish.

However, I couldn't afford to be discouraged here, not when I still had the appoitakara waiting on the sidelines, plus other metals I hadn't even heard of before. I had to overcome the wall before me, here and now, and drive away

any doubts I had.

###

The next day, I braced myself mentally for another full session of battling with the mithril. Hammering out the metal was likely all I'd have time for, considering my pace from yesterday. Before starting work, I made sure to perform the newest additions to our family's rituals: change out the offerings in the *kamidana* and pray. Rike was on entry-level model duty; Samya and Diana went out to hunt. As they left, Samya said, "I think there's something large roaming around here."

Lidy was observing me, as she had been all along. I didn't mind, but...wasn't there anything else she wanted to do besides stare at me hammering day after day?

As I waited for the metal to heat up in the firebed, I decided to broach the topic with her. "Miss Lidy?"

She was composed as she replied in her clear voice. "What is it?"

"Is it enjoyable to watch me work?"

"Hmm. If I were watching a normal person smith from day to night, I would likely grow tired of it. I understand why you're asking, but Master Eizo, I wouldn't call you normal."

I judged that to be a compliment and gave my thanks. "I appreciate it." She honestly didn't know the half of it...

"Besides, we elves live long lives, so a day feels shorter to us than it does to a human."

I pondered the scholastic but surprisingly languid image of elven society. It all made sense—time progressed differently for them.

But wait...Samya said she's only five, right? Does that mean a single day feels really long to her? Unfortunately, I had been reborn in a human body, so I had no way of experiencing for myself how time passed for elves or beastfolk.

"What an exquisite sound," Lidy said. "I've never met a blacksmith who could make mithril sing so beautifully, not in my home village nor in any of the other

villages I've been to."

"The sound changes depending on the smith?"

"Yes. The more efficiently magic is woven into mithril, the purer the tone it makes. Even among elven smiths, there are few who could rival you, Master Eizo."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Rike nodding in agreement, but I pretended as if I hadn't noticed. I simply hummed an acknowledgment and continued to hammer the hot mithril. One clear note after another rang out in the forge.

"The sound is also influenced by how refined the metal is to begin with," continued Lidy.

"Oh, really?"

"For mithril at least. You won't see much of a difference with steel, but the purer the mithril, the better it sounds."

"I see." I struck the sword again to play the elusive and pure song of the mithril for me and Lidy. Entranced by the beautiful ringing, I slipped into my thoughts.

I now understood why the rapier's mithril hadn't sounded the same—that metal must've had a lower purity. The impurities in its composition couldn't absorb magic, and since it couldn't hold as much power, it had been easier to shape overall. That was a plausible theory. Later, if I had the time, I could do some research into how to refine metals.

All in all, it took me three days to hammer the mithril out to the dimensions I wanted. However, the sword was still no more than a rod stuck onto the grip. The next stage was shaping the blade, but I'd save that for tomorrow. Doubling down and pulling an all-nighter was counterproductive to doing a good job. That was advice I'd learned from a wise pig in one of my favorite anime films back on Earth.

I could now see the light at the end of the tunnel, and I'd just hit a checkpoint. Perhaps it was time to treat myself to a day off and restore my energy for the

battle ahead.

Well, that's not my decision alone to make. I'll have to see what the client thinks.

I raised the idea of a rest day to the client—Lidy—over dinner. “Miss Lidy, is the two-week deadline nonnegotiable?”

“Why? Is there anything wrong?” she asked.

“I’ve reached the final stage of the restoration, but I was considering taking the next two days off to recoup.”

“I see.” Lidy rubbed her chin with her hand. She quickly reached a decision, looked me in the eyes, and stated, “It’s all right to extend the two-week deadline.”

“Thank you! I truly appreciate it.” It was rare to receive an extension on a commission’s deadline, but this project required an immense amount of work. As contradictory as it sounded, rest was an important component of productivity.

“That said, I haven’t decided what to do with my off time yet,” I admitted. I stroked my chin as I thought, just as Lidy had a second ago.

“How ’bout we all go fishing again?” Samya suggested.

“You mean on one day or the other, right? Not an overnight stay?” I didn’t think she was proposing a camping trip, but if she was, it wouldn’t be impossible. In any case, I thought I’d better clarify.

She nodded. “Of course.”

“Let’s go fishing the day after tomorrow then.”

“Awesome!” Samya exclaimed. At times like these, she acted her true age, not the age she looked. I always forgot that she was actually five years old on the inside.

“Okay then! We’ll be taking a break tomorrow and the day after,” I said. “We’ll still need to retrieve the spoils of your hunt in the morning.”

“Sure,” said Samya. Lidy agreed.

Shall I make some fishing poles tomorrow afternoon? I won't be able to make reels, but I can at least make rods and hooks for Diana and Lidy. Rike is probably going to be practicing in the workshop during her off time, so she'll be firing up the forge anyway.

I didn't hate my work as a blacksmith or anything, but repeating the same task every single day would only sap my energy. In comparison, just imagining what I'd do on my day off gave me the motivation to keep going. It'd been the same back in my last world.

Vacations were a crucial part of life. Since we already had a secure source of income, I wanted us to start taking regular days off instead of only when the opportunity arose.

Just then, I remembered Samya and Diana's hunt. “I forgot to ask, but what exactly *was* the catch of the day?”

“A deer, a huge one!” Samya boasted.

If the deer was as large as she claimed it was, it might be worth preserving its tendons for the future. “What do you think?” I asked Samya.

“That's trueeee. It's 'bout time for Diana to get a bow of her own. Can I leave that up to you?”

Lidy overheard our conversation and chimed in. “Did you say ‘a bow’? You can make bows, too, Master Eizo?” I could practically see the stars in her eyes. She pressed closer in her enthusiasm.

I was a blacksmith by trade, but since I could make scabbards and the like, crafting a bow wasn't out of the question. Everything was made possible because of my cheats, of course. But for woodwork, I wasn't able to make quality custom items.

“When I have a free moment, I'll make her one,” I said, responding to Samya's request.

According to my installed knowledge, this world not only had wooden bows but composite bows made using animal horns and bones. However, making a

composite bow wasn't a matter of putting in a little extra effort; they took time to make. If I were to make a bow, I would stick to a simple wooden bow. I might consider laminating it, though.

At any rate, as long as Diana was going to be tagging along on Samya's hunts, she would need a bow of her own. It might just save her life one day.

My date with the appoitakara may be delayed anyway. I should look into the characteristics of a bow before then.

"Thanks, Eizo," Samya said.

"Actually, I should be the one thanking you," Diana told me.

"Don't mention it," I replied. "I rarely have a chance to make a bow, so it's a good opportunity for me to try something new."

"From weapons to food and even furniture... You can make it all, can't you, Boss?"

"You know how it goes. When you're not picky about what you try your hand at, you end up learning to do a little of everything. That's how it was with me at least." That was almost entirely a lie, though. All my blacksmithing abilities were cheats. On top of that, my language, crafting, and combat-related abilities were all given, not earned.

With my cheat abilities, I was able to defeat a bear and fight toe to toe with Helen, the mercenary whom I suspected was the strongest in this era. My cheats also helped me with anything "production-related," though that definition seemed to be rather broad—it included anything I could make with my own hands. I wasn't a master craftsman by any means, but I had a solid foundation, and compared to your average person, I could produce items of much higher quality. If I used the same quality scale as I did for weapons, I could make items in the higher range of my entry-level models.

So, it had been misleading to say that I tried my hand at anything... I owed even the flavor of my cooking to my cheats. It was precisely because I hadn't earned any of my skills that I'd never be able to reach the level of a master. I had been able to spar evenly with Helen only because she hadn't been serious about taking my life. If she had come at me with killing intent, I would've been

dead.

As an aside, the language I was speaking now could be considered the common tongue of this world. It was shared by many different races, but I didn't know the exact extent to which it was spoken. Regardless, it was the only language I knew here. I certainly couldn't speak to wolves. However, I might be able to understand more intellectual races, like, perhaps, a cockney dialect spoken by lizardmen. That was just an example though—I didn't know whether such a dialect existed or not.

In any case, I'd be using my cheat abilities to make the bow. That was the second crafted item on my to-do list, but tomorrow, I'd have to make the poles and hooks for our fishing trip.

###

The next day, the five of us went to retrieve the deer's corpse. It was fairly big, certainly the largest of the ones that Samya and Diana had caught so far.

A deer this size will have long tendons.

The tendons would have to be harvested and broken into pieces to separate out the fibers, which would then be intertwined. The longer the original tendon, the better. Samya was the expert when it came to processing sinews, so she would be doing the actual work.

As usual, we butchered the body efficiently, breaking it down into meat, hide, and bones. The bones weren't unusable per se, but it was difficult to turn them into anything useful, so we usually ended up throwing them away. The hide, as with the tendons, was usually processed by Samya, since she was the most knowledgeable. The rest of us prepared the meat, setting aside a portion to eat while it was fresh.

For lunch, I grilled the venison as it was. Once in a while, it was nice to prepare a simple meal like this without fuss. The meat alone was plenty delicious.

In the afternoon, I worked on the fishing rods and hooks that we would need for tomorrow. I wouldn't have to make fishing line since I was planning to use

the finest thread we had in the workshop, just as I had for the last rods I'd made.

I searched in the forest for suitable branches to use as fishing poles and found a few candidates before too long.

"Eizo, what are you grinning about?" Diana asked me when I returned to the cabin.

"Look at these beauties!" I gushed. "Aren't they perfect for fishing rods?"

"If you say so..." Lidy responded with skepticism.

Being young ladies, neither of them understood what moved men's hearts. I, on the other hand, was practically a fossil, but I had been young once... When I'd been a spry lad, I'd acquired a discerning eye for promising tree branches. Well, whether that was a skill people actually aspired to was another story, but in any case, boys in general were skilled at scavenging and scouting.

We still had the rods I'd made last time, so today, I only needed two shapely branches. I trimmed and smoothed down the new ones with my knife. Since I'd gone out of my way to find such superb branches, it was important that I didn't ruin them while working. Of course, with my cheats backing me up, there was no real need to worry.

After the rods came the fishhooks. The hooks were much more delicate to forge than swords or knives, so they required more concentration. Thankfully, since I was able to regain my thirty-year-old body, my vision was still sharp. In my last world, I heard that the ability to see up close was related to the health of a person's eye muscles, so perhaps my vision had even been heightened in the same way as my physical abilities.

Rike was in the workshop with me forging knives for practice, studious as usual. Her skills had improved; although she couldn't forge an entry-level knife as fast as I could, compared to an average blacksmith's speed, she was astonishingly fast. She'd want to move on to elite models soon.

To Rike, this was a period filled with trials and tribulations. Sure, her skills were excellent compared to most blacksmiths, but there were higher mountains for her to climb. Some smiths didn't have the skills nor the

understanding to surpass their current level and couldn't see past their own limited world. However, Rike was different. She understood her limits and had the talent to overcome them. Right now, she was searching fervently for what she needed to do in order to take her skills to the next level.

As her "Boss," I should've been the one to guide her on her journey, but it was impossible to pass my abilities on to her since all my skills were cheats. Honestly, I didn't even understand what I was doing half the time. *I should work to comprehend my own abilities so that I can teach Rike properly one day.*

The sharp clanks of Rike's hammer striking the surface of her practice knife filled the workshop. That sound was interspersed with quiet and syncopated *tinks*, similar to the sound of a hi-hat. There was rhythm but no melody, so you couldn't truly call the combination of the two sounds music, but it was still an enjoyable performance.

When I started making the hooks, I had a moment of doubt—was it all right to depend on my cheats for a task like this? However, given that the quality of the fishhook would have a heavy influence on whether our trip tomorrow ended in success or failure, I had no choice but to use my cheats, right?

Work hard, play harder. With that philosophy in mind, I made eight fishhooks in total (the two I needed plus a few backups). Everything was now ready for our daycation!

###

The next morning dawned brightly. The plan was for all five of us to head to a nearby river to fish. Unlike last time, I had two new companions, dare I say comrades, who could get skunked with me. Diana was the precious young lady of a noble family, so she probably didn't have much fishing experience. Lidy lived in a forest, so perhaps she'd never gone fishing before either.

Not that it was a competition! But it was nice to have friends on your side, both in times of success and failure.

I packed a portable burner and lunch in a basket, which I placed into a knapsack. Alongside that, I added a pot for boiling water and some other miscellaneous items.

Time to depart!

The river was a bit of a trek to get to. Along the way, I asked Samya and Diana about the water sources in our region. According to them, our destination was merely a tributary, just one of the many rivers that flowed out of the lake. The largest river was even farther, nearly the same distance away as the city, which would make it quite a journey. Larger rivers were also deeper, so they were difficult to cross. I decided that I did want to visit it once, just to see it.

Once we arrived at the riverbank, the five of us looked for a promising spot to set up. The location where Samya, Rike, and I had fished last time was decent, but we checked around to see if we could find anywhere better. When we made up our minds, I spread out a sheet along the riverbank and unpacked the basket that held our lunch.

We searched for bait beneath some rocks in the area. Diana and Lidy both baited their hooks without any commotion. I'd expected more of a fuss from them, so their composure was a letdown to me. I asked them both why they weren't squeamish. In response, Diana said, "I used to play outside all the time with my brothers as a child."

Right, right, of course. She had grown up with three older brothers. I felt a sudden pang of sympathy for her father.

As for Lidy, she explained that there was a river running near her home. That made sense, now that I thought about it. Lakes and rivers were the most common water sources in a forest.

Maybe I'll be getting skunked alone today after all...

The five of us spread out along the riverbank and cast our lines. Sunlight danced on the water's surface; the current was lazy and slow where we set up camp, and the breeze was gentle. It was the perfect place to relax.

Once in a while, it's nice to shrug off our responsibilities and take it easy.

Suddenly, I heard a loud splash. Looking over, I saw that Samya had snapped her rod up.

I shouted without thinking. "It's a big one!" A freshwater fish about fifteen centimeters long was struggling at the other end of her line. For a moment, I

was afraid that the line would snap, but it did indeed hold as Samya smoothly pulled the fish toward the bank.

After yanking the fish out of the water, she removed the hook. “Gotcha!” She was beaming with satisfaction, and she held up the fish for us to see. I understood exactly how she was feeling; if I’d landed a fish that size, I would’ve been proud as well.

I tucked my fishing rod under my arm and applauded. “Good show!”

Samya may have taken the gold, but the rest of us couldn’t call it quits just yet. While we were here, we might as well try to catch enough for dinner. Plus...now that Samya had caught a fish, the pain of getting skunked was no longer all of ours to share.

Unfortunately, because the fish were now on their guard (or maybe for some other reason), none of us saw any more bites for a long while.

“It’s just after noon. Why don’t we take a break and have lunch?” I suggested. Everyone agreed, so we began to prepare the meal.

We gathered twigs and branches to use as kindling and built a campfire. I filled the pot with water from the river and set it to boil. I’d brought along some of the mint leaves that Samya and Diana had gathered the other day and steeped them in the water. When the tea was ready, I poured portions into wooden cups for everyone.

I remembered watching an anime in my previous world about a few girls who liked to go camping together. In our case, there was an extra geezer added into the mix, so it didn’t quite have the same trademark laid-back atmosphere.

We chatted about this and that as we ate. Samya, who had already caught a fish, magnanimously shared her fishing wisdom with us. She explained that when she’d lived alone, she’d sometimes fished using coarse mesh nets made out of tree bark.

We didn’t have any nets with us today. Besides, we weren’t fishing for sustenance but for fun. If we were catching fish to survive on, it would make sense to try net or longline fishing.

I should think up some ways to make a longline. Come to think of it, longline

was literally written as “long rope” in Japanese, but a fat rope doesn’t seem like it would be the right material to use.



After we'd eaten and relaxed, we each chose spots along the river that looked promising, and cast our lines in once again. The sun had climbed overhead, so the light now reflected differently off the river's roiling current. The fish seemed to be dazzled by the glimmering light as well.

If only they would take the bait...

"Aaah!"

The sharp cry came from Diana—it looked like she'd hooked a fish. Samya flew to her side and started giving her instructions, and following Samya's guidance, Diana successfully pulled in the fish without much difficulty. Perhaps it was because of her daily swordsmanship training during our sparring sessions, but even though she'd needed Samya's help, her movements were surprisingly clean and efficient. She soon had the fish in her hand.

Diana ran over to me with an ear-to-ear grin. "I really did it! Look!" She held up the fish for me to see. It was just a tad slimmer and smaller than Samya's catch, but it was still a sizable fish.

"You did great," I praised, giving her an honest compliment. "Congrats."

If we were back on Earth, this would've been the perfect moment to pull out our phones for a photo, but unfortunately, cell phones didn't exist here. Neither did photos. Though, perhaps there was a magical tool or spell that could do something similar.

Someday, I hoped to meet someone who would trade their magical knowledge for a sword. Maybe some deal like, *"I'll make you a magical sword, so teach me all your magical secrets."*

After Diana's success, Rike also managed to catch one fish. Lidy and I were the only ones with nothing to show for our time and effort. At this point during our last fishing trip, I'd become uselessly fired up. This time, I resolved to rein in my impatience and stick it out.

While I was doing my best to keep calm and carry on, Samya caught two more fish, bringing our total catch to five. Satisfied that we'd reached our quota, she went to explore the area instead.

No, wait... Was this actually her way of helping me out? Did she leave to clear the area and give me a better chance at catching something?

When it was nearly time for us to head home, I cast my line into the water one final time. Lidy and I still hadn't caught any fish. Even if we were to leave right at this moment, I was grateful to not be alone in getting skunked today.

That being said, I didn't really want to leave until we'd both caught something.

In my periphery, I saw Lidy climb to her feet all of a sudden. I traced the path of her line into the water. A shadow moved frantically beneath the current, its struggling accompanied by loud splashing.

As soon as I'd focused on Lidy, I felt a sharp jerk at the end of my own line.

"Whoa!" I cried out.

I was about to pull my rod back to set the hook when the tugging at my line ceased just as suddenly as it had appeared. I slumped to my knees. Fishing was one arena where my production-related cheats were of no help whatsoever. I guess that should've been obvious.

By contrast, Lidy had safely reeled in her own fish and was now holding it in her hands. She looked toward me with an apologetic expression.

"We have more than we need, so that's a good thing, right? Right?" Diana looked over to Samya, Rike, and Lidy for agreement.

"R-Right. Eizo, you can have the largest one!" declared Samya.

"Diana's right," said Rike. "Family members have to help each other out in times like these, Boss."

"I-It's all luck!" Lidy added.

I was touched by their responses, but their kindness wasn't enough to erase the pain in my heart completely. "Thank you, everyone..." I managed to say. By the time we'd packed up and set off for home, I was still despondent.

Somehow, our dinner ended up tasting saltier than usual.

###

The next morning, I came back from fetching water to find Lidy outside the cabin. She was standing next to a tree with one hand on its trunk.



“Good morning,” I said. “It’s dangerous outside...or not, I guess, based on what you taught us.”

My mind had immediately jumped to warning her against wandering around, but I stopped myself, remembering Lidy’s explanations about this clearing and the surrounding forest.

“Yes. Animals won’t come near when the magic is so thick,” Lidy replied, her voice clear as the ringing of a bell.

“Is that because they sense some kind of threat?” I asked.

“You could say that. Most places with a thick magical atmosphere are also home to monsters.”

Her explanation threw me. “Do you mean to say that we could get ambushed by a monster at any time around here?”

“Not at all. Those kinds of encounters are near nonexistent,” she said. “Occasionally, a forest animal may be corrupted and turn into a monster, but even in that case, they’d most likely retain their original disposition. It is rare, though not unheard of, for a magical beast to go on any kind of rampage.”

Lidy’s story was less comforting than she’d perhaps meant it to be. I doubted that the magical atmosphere around our cabin would make any sort of difference to an animal that had been corrupted.

Wait a minute... Could that bear, the one I killed, have undergone such a metamorphosis?

I recalled the bear that had injured Samya (wow, that event felt like an eternity ago). Maybe that bear hadn’t been fully corrupted at first, but by the time it’d come back around, it had already turned completely into a monster. That must’ve been why the bear’s presence had given me chills...

I didn’t know what exactly the bear had turned into, but I was glad I’d killed it before it’d become a bigger problem.

Huh? Hold on...

“If we were to keep an animal as a pet...” There was some hesitation in my

voice.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Lidy answered. “However, judging from what I’ve seen when you and Miss Diana spar, both of you have excellent swordplay. Should the worst come to pass, as long as you can clean up the situation, owning an animal shouldn’t be a problem. As I said before, the animal’s fundamental nature shouldn’t change much, even if it does turn. For example, wolves around here would retain their intelligence.”

I couldn’t think of a more tragic way to part with a pet. Such a farewell was sure to scar the heart.

On the other hand, it was rare for an animal to transform into a monster, so there was most likely nothing to worry about. In the end, the outcome would be up to chance, but it soothed me to think that, if we purchased a horse, it was likely that the animal would live a good life.

“Magical energy tends to pool in caves and the like, and those places are also common spawning points for monsters—savage ones. Unfortunately, the phenomenon is not well understood.”

What a casual way to explain the birth of monsters... I learned something new today. I’m not sure if Samya or Diana mentioned any caves nearby, but if we find one, I’ll know to warn everyone to stay away.

Once I’d processed everything Lidy had just told me, I asked her, “Incidentally, what did you come outside for?” Her gaze sharpened at my question, and I quickly backpedaled. “I apologize if that was a rude question to ask. Please forget I said anything. I meant no offense.”

“No, it’s all right,” she said. “I’m only here to replenish my magical energy.”

“What do you mean?”

“We all eat food for sustenance, but elves also need magic to live.”

“Interesting.”

Is that why it’s so rare to see an elf in the city? They need magic to survive, and there’s little to be found in the city or the capital. The pieces are all falling into place.

I thought it would be insensitive of me to pry any further, so I only nodded.

Hefting the jugs of water, I turned toward the cabin, but then, Lidy stopped me. “You’re not going to ask any other questions, Master Eizo?” Her face was expressionless and her tone was flat.

“As a red-blooded male, there’s an endless number of questions I want to ask a beauty such as yourself, Miss Lidy,” I said. “However, I know when to keep my mouth shut.” I tried to grin disarmingly and went back inside without another word.

Did it look like I was trying too hard just now?

When I entered the forge, the first thing I did was say a prayer at the *kamidana*. Then, I lit the furnace and the firebed.

After that, I deviated a smidge from the routine. Today, I’d be continuing to restore the mithril sword, but I had finally reached the last leg of the journey. I slapped both hands to my cheeks, pumping myself up. “Let’s do this! One final push!”

Lidy had watched me psyching myself up and she asked, “Is the work from here on out that much more difficult?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Before, I could just focus on hammering the mithril. All I needed was to flatten it out. However, from today on, I’m shaping the sword. As I work, I’ll have to constantly check my progress against the wooden model to make sure I’m keeping faithful to the original.”

“It sounds difficult,” she said before sinking into silence. She looked like she was brooding over something.

“I apologize if I’ve worried you. I intend to complete the restoration to your satisfaction, so please rest assured.”

“No, I haven’t particularly been worr—never mind. I’m counting on you.” Lidy gazed at me intently. The sword must be extraordinarily precious. Knowing that, I was filled with an additional burst of motivation.

Yet, despite my cheats, my progress slowed even further. The key to seeing

this restoration to its end would be to manage my stress and anxiety all the way to the finish line.

I heated the mithril and transferred it to the anvil when the time was right. I'd already moved the wooden model next to the anvil, so it was close enough for me to use as a guide. I hammered the mithril, constantly comparing my work in progress against the model. My cheats helped me understand where to hit, and every hammer strike was accompanied by a resonant tone and a dazzling burst of sparks.

Next to me, Lidy watched.

Is it just me, or is she closer than usual? Perhaps she's more interested now that the work has entered its climax...? I'd be happy if that was the case.

I slid the mithril back into the fire. Every cycle of heating and hammering resulted in a small change to the shape of the sword. I repeated the process over and over, my cheats working in overdrive. While referencing the model, I hammered the metal into the shape of the original sword.

From morning to evening, the ringing of mithril filled the workshop.

By the end of the day, the shaping work was one-third complete. A casual observer might see it and comment, "It looks like a sword...maybe?"

Overall, I estimated that it would take me three days to finish the shaping and then another three or four days for the finishing touches. Two weeks gave me enough time for the restoration with a few days to spare, but we were falling behind on our normal delivery quota for Camilo. It was the right choice to have skipped a week. And at this pace, we might be able to fit in another day off.

###

The next morning, I went out to fetch water. When I came back, Lidy wasn't outside. I asked her about it over breakfast, framing the question carefully so the other three wouldn't understand. Apparently, she didn't have to replenish her magic every day. It was obvious, in retrospect; if she couldn't go a day without replenishing her magical energy, she would've had trouble coming here in the first place.

Today's work was fundamentally identical to yesterday's, so I went through the same routine before getting down to business. The sounds of fire and hammering soon filled the workshop.

Rike, Samya, and Diana were forging alongside me today. Rather than working in silence, they chatted about everything, from the pile of sewing projects that'd been accumulating to Diana's memories of the capital. When Rike needed to concentrate, they would quiet down.

I didn't mind them talking as they worked since it didn't affect my concentration. Plus, I couldn't play music like I would've back in my last world. There was no such thing as a smartphone here. Their chatter was like a radio talk show playing in the background.

Occasionally, I spoke to Lidy as I forged. I would usually ask her about something food-related, she'd answer, and I'd nod back. Today, I had a question for her that'd been on my mind for a while now.

"Lidy, can I ask you something? You're not obligated to answer, of course."

"Yes, please do," she said. The red glow of the mithril was reflected in her blue eyes.

"Will you tell me how this sword ended up in this state?" The restoration was no easy feat, even with my cheats. The original sword must've been exquisite. It was one thing for a high-quality sword to chip or crack, but it had sundered completely. I couldn't help but wonder what exactly had happened... What could have broken such a splendid sword? A *mithril* sword?

I wanted to repair this blade so that it wouldn't break a second time. Once I finished the restoration, it would be ideal if I could test it; I wanted to reenact the final, critical blow that'd shattered the sword in the first place. The curiosity made my blacksmith's blood boil.

Lidy looked down, probably considering whether she should answer or not. After a short while, she raised her head and looked me in the eyes. "The circumstances were magical in nature, so I'm afraid I can't go into the specifics," she began. "There is a way to extract and wield the magic imbued in a mithril weapon. One of the reasons my village guarded this sword was so that we could use its magic in a bind. That circumstance came to pass when the unthinkable

befell the village, and we were forced to draw magic out of the sword. We withdrew too much, and it just—”

“—broke,” I finished for her.

Lidy nodded.

That was why she had been looking for a blacksmith who could not only make the sword whole again but also weave magic into metal. If the smith—whether human, elven, or dwarven—was unable to replenish the sword’s magic, it would no longer be able to function as (pardon the expression) a magical battery. On the other hand, it wasn’t enough to create a vessel for magic with any old shape and design either. The sword was a precious artifact of the village.

“I understand now.”

I brought the hammer up and took another swing at the mithril. It had cooled, so I transferred it back to the fire bed.

Well, there goes my experiment.

Based on Lidy’s story, there would be no way for us to reenact the circumstances which had led to the sword breaking, and it was impossible to prevent the blade from shattering once again.

The sword was comparable to Prince Rubert’s drops. These drops were tadpole-shaped glass beads—the head of the bead could withstand unbelievable amounts of force, but the tail was brittle. Even the slightest damage to the tail would shatter the drop completely. We were in a situation where we could test the “head,” the sword’s durability, but we wouldn’t be able to test the “tail,” the sword’s magical weakness. In addition, I couldn’t prevent the sword from breaking again if its weakness was exploited.

However, the conversation hadn’t been a complete waste of time. There’d been a gem buried away in Lidy’s story. The way she’d sidestepped the details about magical extraction told me that the technique was likely a secret passed down in her village or among elves. Regardless, the information that mithril items could be used as magical batteries was valuable enough.

Lidy didn’t say anything further about what had happened in her village. I had

no intention of wringing the story out of her by force and decided not to ask any more questions. All I said was, "Thank you for sharing this information with me."

By the following day, the shaping work was largely complete. There were still minor adjustments I had to make, but it was a passable replica of the wooden model.

How far will my abilities carry me? How perfect of a replica can I make?

I slapped both palms to my cheeks to focus my mind.

Just a little more.

Before I started to work, I inspected the sword closely to see which spots still needed attention. I was pleased that it looked much more like a sword now compared to when I'd started. I checked and double-checked the power weaved into the metal and was satisfied that it was filled to the brim with magic.

From here on out, I have to continue preserving the magical essence.

I slid the sword into the firebed. Leveraging my cheats, I had arranged the charcoal and controlled the breeze to heat the precise location that I wanted to work on. I waited for the mithril to rise to the correct temperature before removing it and hammering. When I was satisfied, I compared it to the wooden model.

Beyond that, it was rinse and repeat.

Samya and Diana were out hunting today. Rike was forging entry-level model knives. While I worked, I chatted with Rike and Lidy. When I needed to concentrate, like when I had to compare the sword against the model, Rike and Lidy talked among themselves.

When Lidy had first joined us, she and Rike had been stilted and awkward together, but after a week of living in the same cabin, they were starting to open up.

Today, Rike was saying to Lidy, "I just can't grasp the way magic flows... Not

the way Boss can.”

“I’ve heard that dwarves are unparalleled when it comes to analyzing minerals, much more so than magical mastery,” Lidy replied.

“I’d settle for a fraction of Boss’s magical ability, but how am I supposed to learn?”

“That man far exceeds the norm. Comparing yourself to him will only lead to hardship, I think.”

“I know that,” Rike said, “but don’t you have any tricks?”

Hearing that, Lidy relented. “I won’t be here for much longer, but I’ll help you practice in the meantime.”

“Seriously? Yes, please!” Rike exclaimed. “I’m in your debt!” She bowed.

Lidy looked flustered, but she smiled back at Rike. I had a feeling I’d worn that very same expression before.

Dwarves and elves. In my previous world, the two races tended to be portrayed as bitter rivals. It was heartwarming to see Rike and Lidy establish a relationship where they could learn from each other and grow together.

Lidy told me that she’d already come to understand my abilities and there was no longer any need for her to oversee the restoration. And so, she switched from observing me to teaching Rike about magic while Rike worked. That being said, I occasionally saw her sneaking glances my way, so she was still keeping an eye on my progress.

Her diligence was a lifesaver, honestly. I could have more confidence in my work this way. I even asked Lidy for her opinion a couple of times, just to help check my progress. The biggest headaches were caused by mistakes pointed out too late, after much headway had been made. I’d had the displeasure of experiencing that particular flavor of trauma a number of times in my last life. Just remembering those days made me sad...

I finished the work I’d planned for the day without any hiccups. On the other hand, Rike had been occupied with training to see magical essence, so her progress had been slow. Luckily, there was still time before our next trip to

Camilo's, and our delivery "quota" had never been set in stone anyway.

It was more important for Rike to polish her skills. That way, I could make entry-level models, prioritizing speed, and Rike could start making elite models. Flexibility in our roles would make us more resilient. It was important that Forge Eizo not be dependent on my availability to fulfill our quota. Rike would also gain more confidence in her skills and be one step closer to her goal of bringing back new techniques to her family's forge.

As we cleaned up the workshop, Samya and Diana returned from their hunt. They came back empty-handed, so I assumed they'd killed a big animal. When I asked, they said they had taken down a large boar. As always, Diana had played the beater's role.

Flexibility was important on this front too; Samya and Diana could switch roles during their hunts. Apparently, in their spare time, Samya had been training Diana in archery, but it was still up to me to make a bow for her.

Tragically, they weren't blessed with a sighting of the wolf pup today, much to Diana's disappointment.

###

The next morning, we brought back the boar from Samya and Diana's hunt, and after lunch, we busied ourselves with our individual projects. I was continuing my work on the mithril sword; Rike was forging knives, and Lidy was by her side, helping Rike train her magic; Samya and Diana were practicing archery in the clearing.

The swordsmithing was going rather well. At this point, the actual sword matched the model's shape almost exactly, and there was barely a difference in the overall silhouette.

I slid the blade into the firebed to heat. With my cheats guiding me (as always), I removed the sword when I judged it to be the right temperature and struck it several times, adjusting the shape. Before returning it to the firebed to restart the cycle, I also checked to make sure the shape still matched the model.

The work was straightforward and repetitive. It felt like I was stuck inside a loop. However, every time I compared the metal sword to the wooden one, I

saw that the blade had changed minutely, becoming a fraction more similar to the model.

During one round of shaping, once the mithril had cooled out of its target temperature range and I had transferred it back to the firebed, I decided to check in on Rike and Lidy. It looked like Rike was seeing benefits from the training.

The knife she was forging sparkled, which meant that there was more magic woven into it than the items she usually produced. At least, that's the way it appeared at first glance, but I wouldn't be able to tell for sure without a closer inspection.

I returned to my work but continued to think about Rike's training. If she kept improving and eventually learned to imbue her creations with magic, we could start selling a second type of elite model. The breakdown for our new categories would fall along the following lines:

Entry-level models would still be forged with neither special techniques nor magic. Elite models could be works forged with either technique or magic. The first type of elite model would be defined by the care we took to forge the item; our focus would be on drawing out the material's inherent strength and qualities. The second kind would be items forged with more or less the same technique as entry-level models, however, we would weave magic into them. Finally, custom models were blades that were forged by marrying technique with magic, the best of both worlds.

My hope was for Rike to start with the first type of elite model and focus on her technical skills. The resulting blades would end up with more magic that way, and those techniques would come in handy even if she had to forge in a low-magic environment.

The Eimoor family's heirloom sword had been exquisite, even before I'd managed to imbue it with magic, if I do say so myself. So, the first step for Rike was forging swords that were awe-inspiring even without added power. Once she reached that level, then we could plan out the next steps.

However, it was good for Rike to study up on magic while Lidy was around; I was dependent on my cheats, so I couldn't teach her about magic in any detail.

Once Lidy left, I'd take over Rike's training again and have her focus on forging techniques.

I felt like I could hear Samya's teasing voice in my head... If she were here, she'd say something like, "Look who's getting serious!"

I smiled wryly to myself and refocused on the task at hand.

###

Rike, Lidy, and I kept the same schedule the following day. Samya and Diana went out to gather herbs and fruit, and I told them I'd be happy with whatever they found.

The three of us lined up before the *kamidana* to pray—we asked that both our work in the forge and in the forest yield rewards. We bowed twice, clapped twice, and bowed once more. The close of this ritual signaled the official start of the workday.

As for the smithing, it was identical to the previous day's in story, setting, and soundtrack. Lidy was instructing Rike in magic again. Since Lidy was tall and Rike short, it looked, at a glance, like Lidy was a mother who was showing her daughter the ropes. In my previous life, I'd never felt the happiness of watching over family... Perhaps I could now say that I'd checked off that box.

Truthfully, working on the same thing day after day had clouded my mood, but the heartwarming scene before me blew away that fog in an instant.

By the end of the day, the restoration was just a hair's breadth away from the finish line. The sword was nearly indistinguishable from the wooden model. To a layman, it would likely look perfect already, but my cheats told me otherwise. There was still more to do, and I wouldn't reach my goal until tomorrow.

I tidied up my workspace, and by the time I'd finished, Samya and Diana had returned. They'd gathered fruits that looked like strawberries and peaches.

"Did you find what I asked for?" I inquired.

"Yeah, is this enough?" Samya showed me the day's spoils.

"Yes, great. Thanks."

So...you may be wondering what I'd asked for.

The answer was mint, but with a twist—I'd told Samya to bring back mint plants with the roots still intact. My plan was to soak them in water tonight and plant them in the courtyard tomorrow. If they were the same as mint plants on Earth, I could leave them alone from there; they would thrive with just soil, light, and water.

Back in my last world, they were grown hydroponically, and they were abundant, perhaps *too* abundant. If it turned out that I couldn't raise them properly, I'd rethink my strategy, but if this venture was successful, I'd be able to enjoy a refreshing mint tea any time I wanted.

###

After breakfast the next morning, while we discussed our plans for the day, I announced to everyone, "I'll be finishing the restoration today."

"Finally!" Samya cheered. "Go get it, tiger!"

"Almost there, Boss. I'm rooting for you," said Rike.

"I can't wait to see it." That was Diana.

And finally, Lidy chimed in, saying, "I can't thank you enough."

I was pumped up after hearing everyone's encouraging words. Since it was a big day, the other four put a pause on their work to observe me instead.

When we entered the workshop, all five of us prayed at the *kamidana*. I calmed my heart, suppressing the giddiness I felt after being buoyed by everyone's support. When I faced the *kamidana*, I felt as if I were water on the surface of a lake, and a light breeze had crossed over me only moments ago.

We bowed twice and clapped twice. I prayed for the work to go smoothly and for the restoration to finish without incident. We closed our prayers with a final bow. The wind blowing in my heart had died down completely by the end, and I was filled with nothing else but peace and quiet.

Normally, I lit the firebed without thinking about it, but today, I prepared the fire with intent, as if I were breathing it to life.

I approached my work with tranquility. Over the course of the smithing session, I encountered setbacks, but I didn't feel my usual irritation. I wielded

my hammer with the same serenity, and the mithril rewarded my patience by slowly morphing in accordance with my will.

A little past noon, when I'd run out of spots to adjust, I compared the sword to the model one last time. It was a perfect match.

But I wasn't done yet—the last step was to sharpen the blade. The sword had the same appearance as the original, but its edge was dull, and it wouldn't be able to cut anything. I relied on my cheats as I whet the blade slowly and carefully.

A natural consequence of sharpening the sword was that I'd be grinding off some of the mithril. I wasn't sure whether the sword would also lose some of its magic in the process. For the moment, my sole focus was to hone the edge as sharp as possible. The sword felt firm and solid beneath my fingertips and it passed smoothly across the whetstone. The mithril made a *shink* sound as if it were glass. I was delighted to draw out yet another, different kind of sound from the metal.

As I slid the blade across the whetstone a final time, the *shink* sound rang out in the workshop. I inspected the edge. The sword was so sharp that it looked like it could slice through the very molecules in the air. I nodded in satisfaction.

Sensing that I was finished, Lidy passed over the sword's cross guard and grip. I accepted them, then welded them to the blade. If I had my way, not a single atom would be out of place on the completed sword. As the final touch, I secured the hilt with a pin.

I lifted the fully restored sword reverently and ran my eyes along its length from tip to pommel.

"I am done."

My words were met with cheering from my audience, Lidy included. I would do a final round of inspections on the sword, but I was confident that my work was a perfect twin of the original.

"Miss Lidy," I said.

"Yes?" she replied.

“The restoration is now complete. Will you please inspect the sword?”

“Yes. Please pass it to me.”



I handed her the blade, and Lidy started scrutinizing it. Her gaze was serious and focused, and she would leave no part of the surface unchecked. I was sure she wouldn't find any issues with my work, but this was an important commission. With bated breath, I waited to hear her assessment.

I wasn't nervous because of Lidy. Rather, I was afraid to hear that I'd inadvertently imposed too much of my own opinion on the restoration. If I'd failed to honor the original spirit of the sword, then I would've failed as a blacksmith. And if that happened, I'd have no choice but to reforge the blade again.

The more I worried, the more my will wavered. I started to shrink in on myself. It seemed like the three ladies of the house were feeling the same pressure because they were staring daggers into Lidy as she continued her inspection. I was grateful for their support, but at the same time, the excess scrutiny could make it uncomfortable for Lidy to do her job. I wished they'd ease off.

At last, Lidy set the sword back on the counter. She'd reached a decision, and I couldn't help but join in on the sharp staring.

When Lidy looked up, she flinched beneath the combined weight of four gazes but quickly regained her composure. "Thank you all for waiting," she announced. "This sword meets and goes beyond the requirement of the commission."

"We did it!" Samya shouted. She leaped out of her seat and embraced Rike and Diana.

I was thrilled, but something Lidy said had caught my attention. "'Goes beyond'? What do you mean?"

I wasn't angry or sad at the outcome; I simply asked out of curiosity.

Going above and beyond a client's expectations was a cause for celebration. It was an unquestionably positive review, normally speaking. However, the requirements for this particular commission were to restore the sword to its "original" condition. In this scenario, was going beyond the original desirable? It was possible that matching the exact quality of the sword was critical.

Luckily, Lidy answered promptly, “Let me explain. The requirement was to restore the sword to its former condition. The appearance, of course, is a perfect match, but in terms of the magic, you’ve actually managed to imbue the sword with much more power than it had previously held. For the purposes of the specific magical techniques we use, the more magic the sword holds the better. You’ve done us a huge favor.”

She must’ve been referring to the magical battery. Exceeding the sword’s capacity for magic had resulted in the sword breaking, so a bigger capacity was beneficial.

I was relieved. The worry that I’d transgressed lifted from my shoulders.

I didn’t know how much magic the sword had held before, but it must have been a fair amount. Yet, the elves had to expend the sword’s magic completely. What could have happened to Lidy’s village? I was curious, but no matter how you looked at it, that wasn’t the sort of question I could ask casually.

Well, if it breaks again, I’ll just have to repair it a second time.

“About the commission fee...” Lidy said.

Oh right...payment is usually a part of transactional services.

The restoration had been a great learning opportunity for me, so I didn’t mind a reduced payment. In any case, I already had a system for moments like this.

“The payment for people who come alone to make their request is at the commissioner’s discretion. Please pay what you think the restoration is worth, Miss Lidy.”

“I see,” she replied. “Let me think.” She brought up a hand to rest delicately on her jaw as she pondered. With her slim face and elegant demeanor, the gesture suited her.

Our last guest before Lidy was Helen. Talk about two people who are as different as night and day...

After thinking for a short while, Lidy said, “Please wait here a moment.” She then returned to the living area.

In the meantime, I picked up the sword, now restored to 120 percent of its

former condition, and settled into a fighting stance. The blade was extremely light. Considering that I'd been working with it for the last two weeks, that wasn't news to me. A steel sword would've been much heavier since steel was far denser. By weight, the same amount of steel would've only been enough to make a *hinogokami*, a small Japanese folding knife.

Well, I exaggerate, but it certainly wouldn't have been enough for anything much bigger than a knife.

I would've tested a few swings, but the sword belonged to the customer. With a newly forged sword, I could've claimed the first swing to trial the blade's edge, but this commission was a restoration.

Before long, Lidy came back holding a small, cloth bag, which I guessed to be her wallet. "Thank you for your patience," she said.

From the bag, she removed five gold pieces and two thin bars of something that I'd never seen before. When I looked closer, they turned out to be jewelstones. I didn't know their exact worth, but they certainly looked valuable.

"A sword imbued with this amount of magic may be worth more than this," said Lidy, "but this amount is all I can afford at the moment."

This...already looks like way more than enough. Lidy supplied the original materials and even tutored Rike in magical studies. I also learned a lot from this project...

Oh! I've got an idea.

"How about we do this," I countered, slipping one gold piece back into Lidy's hand. "Instead of taking this outright, I'd prefer a trade: can you deliver a gold piece's worth of vegetable seeds from your village to the merchant who told you about our forge? Let him know it's for me, and he'll take it from there. Whatever your village can spare is enough. If it's too much money for one delivery, I would be perfectly happy with seasonal deliveries as well. Unless...you're forbidden from taking the vegetables grown in your village off premise...?"

"No, of course not. We regularly sell vegetables to human merchants," she replied. "Are you certain?"

“Yes. I’d originally planned to see what vegetables were sold in the city during our next visit. This works out perfectly. Plus, we have a similar deal with the merchant in the city.”

It wasn’t a discount per se, but Lidy would be able to take the gold piece back to her village. I contented myself with the compromise.

I had talked to Rike and Diana about the fee for Helen’s dual blades and the compensation I’d received for my role in settling the Eimoor family dispute...but they’d scolded me, saying, “You mustn’t sell your services short. Make sure you receive the proper payment. Otherwise, you won’t be able to stand next to other blacksmiths.” I’d resolved then that I would stop giving discounts. At least, *obvious* discounts.

Samya had seemed confused about why Rike and Diana had been angry. It wasn’t that Samya was bad with numbers or money, as she had a perfectly adequate grasp of our day-to-day living costs. I suspected that the commission fees were too high for her to fully grasp the real value.

And for Lidy’s commission, I thought that three gold pieces was plenty.

Lidy looked lost in her own thoughts, but she came to a decision swiftly. “I agree to your proposal.” She then returned the gold coin to her pouch.

I’d actually wanted to give her back one more gold piece for Rike’s tutoring fees, but I didn’t want to push my luck. Everything would’ve been for naught if Lidy turned me down.

With the commission wrapped up in a neat little bow, we threw a goodbye party for Lidy over dinner. I brought out a feast of meat and wine. Perhaps it was strange to throw a party for a customer, but she wasn’t just a customer; she’d been our housemate all this time.

Lidy had wanted to pay a lodging fee as well, but as far as I was concerned, it balanced out with the lessons on magic that she’d given to Rike.

Humans in this world who weren’t born into prestigious families had no access to magic, which meant that knowledge about magic was a valuable commodity. If anything, the lessons were probably worth more than the few

nights at our cabin. However, from Lidy's perspective, she felt like she'd underpaid for the restoration work. In the end, we both agreed to call it even.

As the night wrapped up, Lidy said to me, "I've had a lot of meaningful experiences while staying here with all of you. I quite enjoyed myself, honestly. While I hope I won't need to call on your repair expertise again anytime soon, I would like to return if anything comes up in the future."

I smiled at her. "You are welcome back any time. We await your patronage here at Forge Eizo."

###

The next morning, Lidy started her day in the forest, absorbing magical energy. She said it was to fuel the spell she'd construct to hide her presence on the journey back.

Although elves were strong magic users, traveling alone was still risky. I'd thought that Lidy would be a skilled swordsman, but it turned out that she actually had only the bare minimum of self-defense skills. In lieu of relying on combat, she had used magic to hide herself along the road to the city, dismantling the spell only once she'd been close. Similarly, when she'd traveled to the cabin, she'd used disguise magic on the road and in the forest.

The five of us ate one last breakfast together, then Lidy packed and prepared to leave. Everyone would accompany her through the forest and see her off at the road. This way, we could help lessen Lidy's magical burden.

Samya led the party, followed by me, Lidy, and Rike, with Diana in the rear. There was no cart for me and Rike to pull today, so I had my hands free. Just in case, I brought along the spear I'd used to fight the bear.

Come to think of it, it would've made more sense to have brought along the delivery goods... We could've escorted Lidy all the way back to the city. A wasted opportunity! I'd remember going forward.

We didn't see anything unusual on our way to the forest entrance, just birds and small critters who were no threat. It was a peaceful trek.

Since Lidy was an elf, there was a part of me that thought she might speak to the forest animals, but I was ultimately disappointed.

Elves aren't so different from high-spec humans with magic abilities and long life spans, I guess.

When we reached the city road, Lidy turned to us and extended her right hand. "Thank you, everyone, for all that you've done for me."

"It was our pleasure. Please come again. We'll be waiting." I clasped her hand in mine, and the other three all took turns doing the same.

"See ya!" said Samya

"I'll keep up the magic training!" Rike promised.

"Can you teach me some elven sword techniques next time?" Diana asked.

And with that, Lidy took off. She waved at us and yelled out, "Until next time!"

I was surprised, in a good way, by her volume. She was usually very quiet.

All of us waved back at her. She set off on the road, and we watched until she had disappeared in the distance.

"She's gone," Samya whispered. Even a former lone wolf (or tiger) like Samya felt the emptiness of parting with someone you've grown close to.

"She'll come back with another commission someday," I said.

"That's right," Diana chimed in. "There are a lot of things that no one other than Eizo can make."

We turned around and reentered the forest.

Tomorrow, our quiet, normal days would resume once again.

Epilogue: An Elven Village in the Forest

There is one legend about this forest.

In our village, there is a mithril sword we consider sacred, our protective deity. The sword is stronger and many times more beautiful than any other.

A long time ago, when we elves lived in a different village in a different forest, a blacksmith breathed new life into this sacred sword. Reborn, it would later save the village from several disasters.

It was as if the sword had taken on the very soul of the blacksmith, a man who could be called the Keeper of Time.

This legend recounts the sword's rebirth.

"A long, long time ago, our ancestors lived in a different forest," a mother told her child.

This was a scene that could be happening in any home, in any place, a scene unchanged since time immemorial. But this moment took place in a village nestled deep in the forest. The mother and child both had the distinctive pointed ears of elves.

Perhaps due to the magic they absorbed, elves lived long lives. Their "long, long time ago" was set further back in history than a normal human could imagine, no less than two thousand years.

"And so, with the sacred sword broken, the villagers worried over what to do. After much discussion, they sent a woman to visit the blacksmith," the mother said.

"Master Eizo?" the child asked.

She smiled. "Yes, exactly." The elven mother had never met the blacksmith, but her grandmother apparently had.

Her grandmother had likened him to the sunlight filtered through tree leaves

on a bright summer day: intense but kind. Could it have been true? The mother thought it might be. Whenever she visited the chapel where the sword was enshrined and saw the blade that had been restored by Eizo's hands, she always sensed a gentleness within the metal's cold exterior.

Eizo's physical appearance was a mystery. There were no sculptures or even portraits bearing his likeness, not because they'd been lost in history, but because the man himself had refused to sit for them.

The child's eyes sparkled while listening to the tale of Eizo. "When I grow up, I'm going to be just like him!"

"Oh, are you? You'll have to study hard then," the mother teased. "The elders say that he was a wise man."

"Awww," the child groaned.

The mother stroked her child's hair.

From outside, someone called the child's name. The mother nodded permission, and the child dashed out of the house.

From within the chapel, the sacred mithril sword watched over the village. It glowed with reflected light, warmly, as if it were smiling.

The Story of How We Met III: A Sinless Lady's Flight

"Sorry to involve you in this," the young heroine of our tale said to her servant.

"Think nothing of it, miss. I am happy to be of service."

The young lady was wearing luxurious clothing, the quality of which was obvious at a glance. In a flash, she changed into a different and clearly pedestrian set of clothes. The villager's outfit wasn't hers; she'd borrowed it from the servant.

Before long, her transformation into an average village girl was complete. She then strapped on a breastplate and other pieces of protective armor. They stood out against her otherwise plain attire but were nonetheless indispensable for the journey she was about to make.

The young lady was Diana, daughter of the Eimoor family, and she was preparing to flee the estate she called home.

After the deaths of the head and first successor of the family—Diana's father and eldest brother—her remaining two brothers had been bitterly disputing the inheritance. Originally, the countship should have been passed down to the second eldest brother, who was next in line for the title. However, he wasn't a legitimate son of the count, so the succession had been muddled.

Just when exactly had it all begun? Had Karel started acting oddly around the time of his father and brother's deaths? Diana's bookish and kind older brother had lost his smile and stopped coming by the house.

Diana, who had heard the whole story from her worried third brother, Marius, didn't understand Karel's reasons. And around that time, Karel had started plotting. When those schemes had expanded to target Diana, she and Marius discussed what to do, concluding that Diana, who had no involvement with the battle for succession, should hide and wait out the storm.

It was in the midst of that discussion that Marius asked her, “Don’t you think it’s strange?”

“What is?” Diana replied.

“The culprit. There’s an overwhelming possibility that Karel stole the sword, but there’s not a shred of evidence.”

“He must have planned it out very thoroughly.”

“Yes, I suppose so. But look, we’re talking about Karel here. Could he really have thought up such a callous scheme? And, supposing he did, he’d need both money and manpower to pull it off. Where did he find those resources?”

“Maybe he had an accomplice,” Diana suggested.

“Most likely,” Marius agreed. “But I can’t imagine who it could be.” He shrugged.

To describe the situation as tense would’ve been an understatement, but Diana wouldn’t forget this exchange—Marius had been trying to spare her feelings. Both of their nerves had been worn thin from the heavy pressure they lived under day to day, but Diana would always be grateful for that kindness.

“Now then, about where you should hide...” Marius started.

“Do you have any good ideas? All the places I can think of...well, Karel would figure them out in a heartbeat.”

“Yeah, that’s certainly one downside of having a family member as an enemy. He can predict all of our moves. But, rest assured.”

“You mean...?”

“I have a place in mind,” Marius said.

“Somewhere safe?”

“Yeah. There’s a smith who lives in the middle of the Black Forest.”

“A person like that exists?” Shocked by the information, Diana raised her voice without thinking. The Black Forest was notorious within the country—probably around the world—as a dangerous region. It was home to ferocious wolves and bears, but that wasn’t all... Monsters were known to roam those

parts as well. It was said that once you entered it, you'd never leave.

Just passing through the forest safely was already an amazing feat. Living inside its bounds was on a whole other level.

Marius grinned. "He exists, all right. As a matter of fact, he forged this sword." He gestured toward the blade strapped to his waist. Marius had acquired it while he'd been working as a city guard; it looked like any other sword, but apparently, it was unbelievably sharp.

"He's the real deal?" Diana asked.

"I guarantee it. I've met him several times, and he's an honorable person. After I met him, he struck up a deal with a merchant in the city, so that merchant would probably know his location best of all."

"I see."

"If you're going to hide, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that his place would be the safest in the country...no, the whole world."

"I suppose so. It's in the Black Forest, after all."

"Right. So, like I said, the merchant—his name's Camilo—knows the blacksmith's exact location. I drafted this letter, so take it to him. He'll know what to do."

"I understand," Diana said, accepting the letter that Marius held out.

The message was sealed with wax, but it wasn't stamped with the Eimoor family crest. Was that because Marius was afraid of the letter falling into the wrong hands or because he wasn't officially the head of the family yet? Diana wasn't sure, but she trusted her brother to know what he was doing.

"You should leave today," Marius said. "Sorry for springing all of this on you. I don't know how much Karel has planned, but the sooner we act, the better our chances of catching him off guard."

"I agree. I'll talk to Catalina and the others and start making preparations," Diana said.

"Then I'll leave it in your hands."

Before now, Marius had thought that to win the succession battle, he simply had to be the last one standing. But his life was only one-half of the victory—he also had to make sure that Diana was safe. Ideally, he wouldn't have to harm Karel either, but that was just Marius's own selfish desire.

Marius or Karel. Supposing neither fell in battle, the loser would still likely suffer heavy injuries, perhaps dire enough to make leaving the battlefield difficult. Marius had no intention of ending up on the losing side.

Determined, he placed a hand on Diana's shoulder.

Dressed in servant's clothes and armor, Diana sneaked out of her family's estate through the back entrance. She wasted no time, taking a secret route out of the capital that she and her brothers had used to traverse when they'd been little. The route saw little traffic, which made it the perfect playground for four children, and also the perfect escape route for Diana's impromptu flight.

Diana didn't know whether to feel sad or relieved. The route was a saving grace, but her joyful childhood memories were now tainted by the present. Right now, the most important thing was for her to get to shelter. Knowing she was safe would also ease Marius's burdens, allowing him to focus on resolving the conflict.

She proceeded along the road as fast as she could, staying on the lookout for the slightest sign of danger. She hoped desperately that she would not run into any trouble.

She awoke on the roadside the next morning.

The previous day, she had been fortunate enough to meet a group of traveling women—mercenaries, apparently—and had camped with them for the night. The women were journeying to the capital to look for work. Not only were they heading in the opposite direction of Diana's goal, but she didn't want to risk involving them in any danger that might be headed her way. So, after eating breakfast together, she parted from them.

It was a beautiful day. The good weather and refreshing breeze lent an air of leisure and peace to the journey. If she hadn't been in danger, it would've been

the perfect day for traveling.

Diana's nickname was the Rose of the Duel Grounds. She was stronger and more athletic than most women, and she was fast and light on her feet. However, the need for extra caution curbed her speed. Bandits could appear or beasts could emerge from the Black Forest at any time. Running outright would draw too much attention, and attracting attention was the last thing Diana wanted to do, especially if pursuers were looking for her.

In the end, all of Diana's vigilance and caution were for naught.

The first sign of danger was the sound of running feet behind her. She whipped around as soon as she heard her pursuers, but it was too late—they were gaining on her quickly, and she didn't have enough time to run. She prepared to fight and unsheathed the sword strapped to her waist, then turned to put the Black Forest at her back. If worst came to worst, she would escape into the woods.

Her pursuers were a team of three men, all wielding shortswords. Diana carried a longsword, so she had the advantage of a greater reach. If she fought well, she could hold them back long enough for someone to come to her rescue. Otherwise, she'd have to take a gamble.

The men swarmed her. Diana cursed as she parried their flurry of blows, but it was three versus one. She was clearly at a disadvantage.

I'll have to make my move soon.

As Diana steeled herself, one of the men faltered. His jerky movement was followed immediately by a swoosh sound. An arrow suddenly flew through the air where the man had been a second ago.

A young, feminine voice called out, "I've got your back!" Diana looked over to see a woman—a tiger-woman—carrying a bow. That explained where the arrow had come from.

From a distance, the woman unleashed her arrows with precision, fending off the men who were still attacking at Diana's openings. Rather than trying to end the fight by whatever means possible, it looked as if the woman was prioritizing

Diana's safety and blocking potentially fatal attacks.

The woman's strategy bothered Diana. Was she waiting for someone? Did the woman have additional reinforcements on the way that would turn the tide of this battle?

The answer to Diana's doubts came faster than she'd expected.

"Stop right there, you bastards!!!" a man shouted.

The young woman who'd come to her aid looked relieved, which meant that the man was likely an ally.

Diana continued to desperately parry and attack the assassins, but she, too, felt reassured by the man's appearance. Strangely, strength filled her anew; it looked like she would make it through this confrontation after all.

Though she didn't know it at the time, her meeting with this mysterious stranger would change her fate.

Afterword

To those of you who read the first book, we meet again. And to those of you—fewer in number I suspect—who started following the series from volume two, it's nice to meet you. I write light novels under the pen name Tamamaru.

It has been a while since the last volume. The first book was well received, and thus I now have the chance to pen an afterword for a second time. Thank you for your support.

In the last volume, due to limited space, the afterword was dedicated to acknowledgments. This time, I have been given an extra page, so I would like to add a few words about the story as well.

The following includes spoilers for the volume. For those of you who like to begin reading a book starting at the acknowledgments, please proceed with caution.

As I mentioned briefly in the afterword of the previous volume, I started writing this work on a whim. At the time, the story itself had yet to crystallize. Even now, the story continues to morph and change as I write.

Let me explain what I mean: I'd intended to introduce Diana as the first of the heroines, but instead, she made her debut in this volume. Her role as the daughter of a nobleman has largely remained unchanged. Before Diana joined forces with Eizo, I thought I needed to first introduce a character that was familiar with the forest, which is how Samya came to be. Her story grew from there to keep the plot consistent, and it all snowballed into the work you are holding here today.

If the story hadn't been popular enough, I'd planned to end this volume with the Eimoor Family ruckus, leaving the story of Lidy the Elf untold. The elf plotline is largely unchanged from my initial conceptualizations. The fact that the story reads smoothly without any additional machinations is a source of pride for me as an author.

So, in this volume, we finally meet Diana, the supposed-to-be first heroine. The Eimoors make another appearance in the bonus stories. Their role will only grow from here on out. Well...I don't want to make any promises. Please do keep reading to find out.

One more thing... The reasons why Eizo has not made any strides on the romantic front have already been introduced in the web novel. Some of you may be vexed by the development, or lack thereof. When will there be progression? That question has yet to be answered even in the web version (supposedly).

“Wait, aren't we missing an encounter story?” you might ask. “Even Helen's story has already appeared.” Please keep reading the future volumes (if there are any) to see what happens.

Now then, my work has been novelized thanks to Kakuyomu and their Web Novel Contest. I submitted an entry to the fourth Kakuyomu Web Novel Contest and won the grand prize in the isekai fantasy category. The web serialization is available on Kakuyomu as well.

The events of the web novel differ slightly from the compiled book but only slightly. For those of you who are curious about future developments, I would be grateful if you give the web novel a try.

Furthermore, I believe that by the time you are all reading this volume, the manga adaptation will have already begun. The manga was made possible thanks to Web Dengeki PlayStation Comic, Comic Walker, and Nico Nico Seiga.

Himori Yoshi-sensei will be in charge of the art. You'll experience a side of Eizo and company that you've never seen before. Please check out the manga adaptation as well.

Now, on to the acknowledgments.

I am grateful to Kinta-san, as always, for the beautiful illustrations in this volume and to Himori Yoshi-sensei for the art for the manga. The prospect of seeing such stunning artwork gives me extra motivation when revising my manuscripts.

Of course, I must thank my editor S-san, who has accompanied me

throughout this entire journey.

Thanks to my friends, my mother and my little sister, and the two cats—Chama and Konbu—for giving me the energy to continue writing.

Last but not least, the most heartfelt thanks to the readers who have stuck with me up to this point. May we meet for a third time at the end of volume three!

SAMYA

A half-tiger girl who's one of the beastfolk. She came to live with Eizo after he rescued her from the brink of death.

DIANA

The precious daughter of the Eimoor comital family. She's a tomboy who loves swordplay.

EIZO

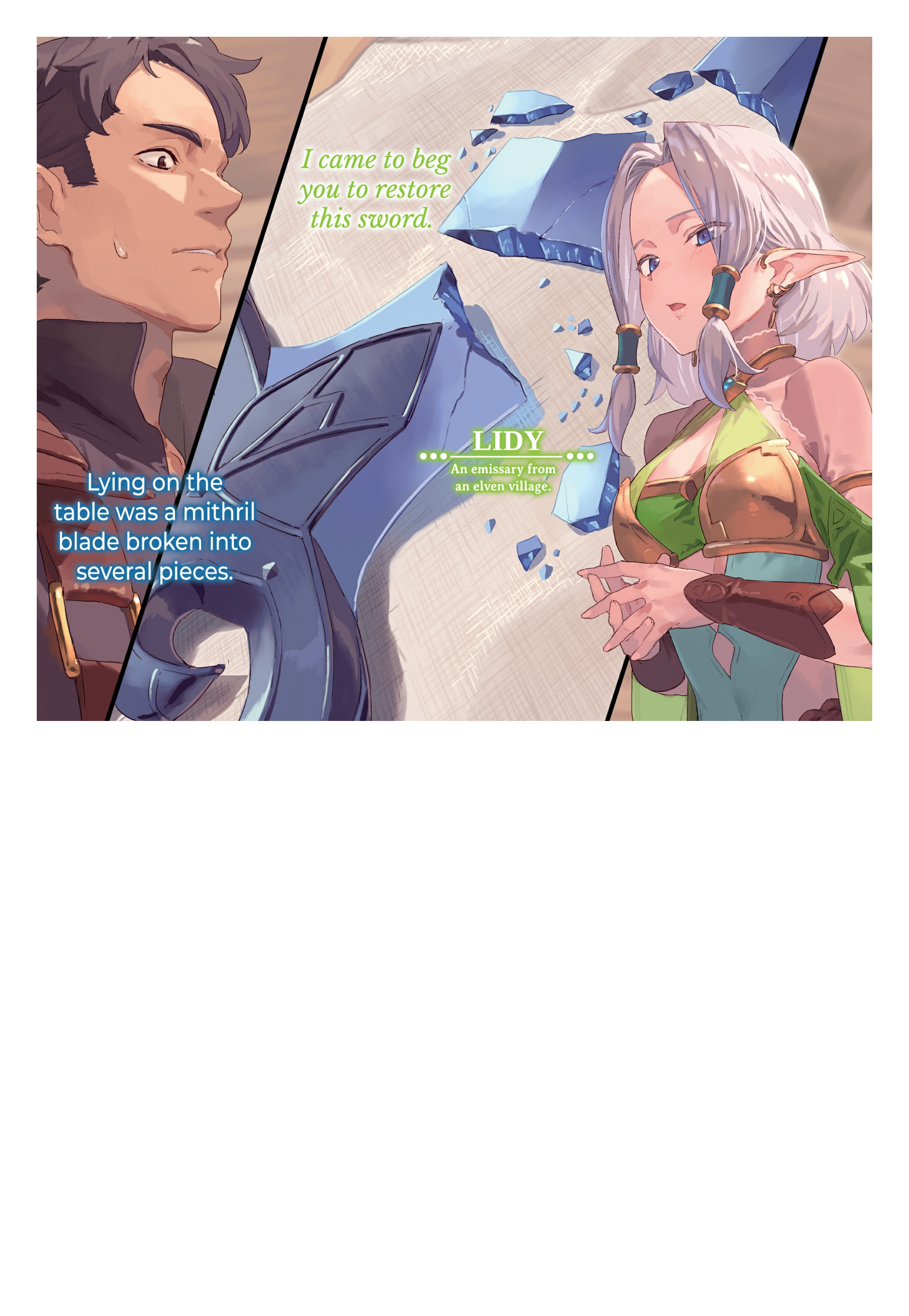
A man who loves cats and working with his hands. Formerly a corporate drone.

RIKE

A dwarf who begged her way into an apprenticeship with Eizo after being captivated by his skills.

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World

2

An anime-style illustration of a man and a woman looking at a broken sword. The man, on the left, has dark hair and a serious expression. The woman, on the right, has long white hair and blue eyes, wearing a green and pink outfit with a gold helmet. They are standing in a desert-like environment with a large, broken sword lying on the ground. The sword is made of a dark, metallic material and is shattered into several pieces. The background is a vast, open landscape with a few small, blue, crystalline structures scattered around.

*I came to beg
you to restore
this sword.*

... **LIDY** ...

An emissary from
an elven village.

Lying on the
table was a mithril
blade broken into
several pieces.

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

2

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World



SAMYA

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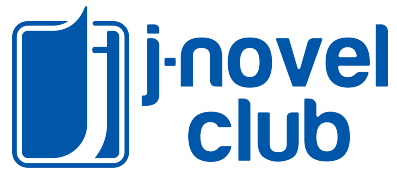
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My Quiet Blacksmith Life in Another World: Volume 2

by Tamamaru

Translated by Linda Liu Edited by C.D. Leeson

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